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ELEPHANT TOM, OF DURANGO; or, Your Gold-Dust or Your Life.

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AUTHOR OF "EQUINOX TOM," "SOL SCOTT," "ALABAMA JOE," "JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," "PACIFIC PETE," "OLD '49,"
"THREE-FINGERED JACK," "THE LONG-HAIRED PARDS," "JOAQUIN, THE SADDLE KING," ETC., ETC.



A MOAN OF HORROR BROKE FROM THE LIPS OF THE MAIDEN, AND THEN HER OVERTAXED BRAIN GAVE WAY AND SHE HUNG A
LIFELESS WEIGHT ACROSS THE STUMPY RIGHT ARM OF THE OUTLAW.

ELEPHANT TOM, OF DURANGO;

OR,

Your Gold-Dust or Your Life.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "SPITFIRE SAUL," "OLD BOY OF
TOMBSTONE," "OLD '49," "EQUINOX
TOM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DESPERATE BIT OF WORK.

THE sun had but recently sunk to rest behind the western hills; the vault of heaven was wholly free from clouds; yet the gray twilight was rapidly deepening over the face of the earth, and already surrounding objects were growing indistinct to the human eye.

A dreary, depressing scene at the best. All around, sand, rocks, barrenness and desolation. Yet, even here, the never-satisfied Caucasian has placed his sign-manual.

Curving, winding, like the trail of some enormous serpent through the desert, now crossing some sandy stretch, now piercing a rocky waste, where the diamond drills and mighty giant powder has opened a way, extends a tentacle of that wondrous thing which we call civilization—the iron pathway of the mighty steam-horse.

Yonder indistinctly looms up an ungainly wooden structure, spanning the rocky bed of a foaming, brawling stream, over which the iron rails, so recently laid that their unpolished tops give back no reflection of the glimmering stars, run on and on, until their present tarrying place is reached, at the lively, mushroom mining-camp of Durango.

Faint and indistinctly there comes the short, double whistle given as the train nears and passes the station below, and, as though this was the signal for which they were lying in wait, a number of phantom-like shapes flitted swiftly to and fro, then vanished once more, apparently leaving all as before.

Crouching down in the dense shade cast by a weather-beaten rock and a withered shrub, a keen-eyed man with hard-set face, watched these rapid shiftings, then cast an anxious glance down the track, bending his ear as though in listening.

Not a breath of air was stirring to distract his attention or dissipate the faint rumbling sounds which came to his hearing. The train was coming. Already he fancied he could distinguish the significant vibrations of the iron rails.

"That settles it!" he muttered, barely above his breath. "Their last chance is gone. If they had stopped at the station, they must have discovered something was wrong. But they didn't. They passed it by—they're coming headlong to death and destruction! In five minutes more they'll take the plunge to join the fishes, or go up to heaven with the timbers of yonder bridge—*unless I save them!*"

He thrust his head through the withered shrub, glancing swiftly up and down the track. Not a living soul was to be seen. The phantoms of the night were lying close in their coverts, waiting patiently for the feast of death which their unscrupulous cunning had provided.

Louder and clearer grew the peculiar humming of the iron road, doubly distinct from the perfect silence of nature. Above this, came the rapid puffing of an engine. The train was coming, and close at hand. Heaven help the living freight, should this white-faced man fail them now!

"I'll do it!" he grated, between his tight-clinched teeth as he withdrew his head and set his fingers swiftly to work. "It's a big stake, and well worth the risk. They can but rub me out, if they discover—"

His mutterings died away, as he bowed his body over a bundle of paper, dried grass and twigs, tied around a part of a fishing-rod, thus shielding the flicker of a match from any suspicious eyes below.

One more glance along the iron way, and as he caught a glimpse of a glowing eye of fire, he touched the match to his hastily improvised torch, and as the inflammable material ignited, he leaped to his feet, swinging the rod around his head, and leaping down upon the track, ran with all the swiftness of a frightened deer toward the oncoming train, yelling at the top of his voice, flashing his crackling torch back and forth, while the sparks and wisps of blazing grass fell over his person.

Barely a quarter of a mile apart were the two lights—that of the head-light before the engine and the torch of the white-faced man—the one coming on at express speed, the other racing as a man runs when life is at stake. Time and space enough for stopping the train, in these days of automatic brakes, if those who control them are not blind and deaf.

The latter they must surely be, for still the train thunders on at undiminished speed, despite the flashing of that rude torch, despite the wild yells of warning which the man who bears it sends out at every stride, despite the still wilder tumult which fairly rends the air.

Up from their ambush leap the skulking shadows, yelling, cursing, emptying their revolvers as rapidly as nimble fingers can manipulate the hammers and triggers. Around the bold man who still circles the blazing torch their ragged lead hums and whistles most viciously. Two men leap up from the rocks along the track, one on each side, between him and the train. They dash toward each other, intent on cutting him off, their weapons cracking viciously. But he never falters, never alters his sweeping stride as his right arm swings up, then sweeps from right to left, with a barely perceptible pause as the silver bead covers the first figure.

Crack! crack!

One man plunges headlong into the cut, falling across the track. The other flings up his arms, sending one shot toward the stars, as though defying the heavens he had so often insulted, even in death, then falls backward, to be seen no more.

Still on the white-faced man dashes, never ceasing his warning cries. Behind him come the fellows of the twain who dropped before his bullets. And still on rumbles the train.

All this occurred with almost the rapidity of thought. Though each moment seemed to consume an age in its passage, barely a score of seconds had elapsed from the first yell of warning, before a wild shriek burst from the engine whistle, before the brakes were applied, the action reversed, causing the wheels to whirl around amid a shower of sparks from the sanded rails as the train still slid on, unable to immediately overcome its tremendous momentum.

None too soon. The doomed bridge is but a few rods distant. The outlaws are rushing down the track, their lead pattering against the iron and steel, their curses and oaths full of death and murder.

The torch fails, now that its work is done. The frail fastenings are burned in two. The debris drops over the head and shoulders of the white-faced man, clinging to his clothes and skin; but he heeds them not.

With agile strides, he gains the side of the locomotive just as its headway is checked sufficiently for him to catch the railing and swing himself up into the cab.

With a howl of mingled fright and rage, a man aims a desperate blow at his head with an iron bar, and in seeking to avoid it, the one who was playing such a bold game, staggers back, loses his footing, and falls to the ground.

An angry snarl breaks from his lips as he recovers himself and leaps into the cab, one hand closing upon the fellow's throat like a vise.

"You clumsy fool! what the deuce are you trying to do?" he grates, shaking the stalwart fellow as though he were handling a stripling in size and strength. "I've risked my life to save you from being wrecked, and— Pull her wide open and send her back, if you love your life! Down, you hell-hound!"

With a sweep of the bar which he wrested from the engineer, he knocked aside the revolver which a man was thrusting toward him from the outside, then leaned forward and fired.

Without a groan the train-wrecker fell back. Bewildered, confused, scarce knowing what he did, the engineer obeyed the fierce command, and the train rolled backward, gaining speed with each revolution of the wheels, while the white-faced man leaning far out of the cab, worked his revolvers with swift dexterity.

For a few moments the wreckers continued their fire, their yelling, their pursuit, but then—

A tremendous report was heard; the twilight was briefly illumined by a brilliant light, but long enough for the startled engineer and no less terrified stoker to behold the destruction of the bridge which, only for that timely warning, they would at that moment be crossing.

High into the air the massive timbers were hurled—then the light vanished, and all was dark.

Not a sound came from the wreckers, but by the streaming light of the reflector they could be seen scrambling out of the cut, up the rocks, vanishing into the dense shade beyond.

"A narrow margin, but we're on the right side of it—no thanks to *you*, though, my good fellow!" exclaimed the white-faced man, with a grim laugh, as he nodded toward the trembling engineer. "Had you been alone I don't know but what I'd have jumped the game and left you to rustle for yourself, since you were hell-bent for suicide!"

"Pin him, Dick!" cried an excited voice from beyond the tender. "I'm with you in a minute! Nail him, boys!"

A heavy chunk of coal came crashing into the cab, narrowly missing the head of the man who had run such desperate chances, and the conductor, wild with excitement, came scrambling over the tender and leaped into the narrow space, only to be pinned by the man he assaulted and held harmless.

"Of all the infernal fools and bull-headed ingrates, I'm betting my pile this train's got the king-pins!" he grated, angrily. "If ever I risk my neck to save—"

"Ain't you— I thought it was one of those rascals!" the conductor gasped.

"He ain't—I kin see it all now!" cried the en-

gineer, his bewildered brain clearing. "He's the man that made the signal. I saw him shoot at those devils—"

"Without wasting all of the lead I slung, either, I'm betting odds," laughed the man, grimly. "But now your eyes are opened, get back to the cars and muster what fighting-men you can. Stop at the station and get ready for work, if necessary. I reckon the worst is over, but when such hounds as those were get stirred up, there's no telling how far they'll go."

"You think they'll make another attack?"

"I don't say that, but they *may*. Do as I say. It can do no harm, and may do good. Belively. We're almost there."

Pushing the conductor up on the tender, the rescuer followed him, after warning the engineer to stop at the station. Aboard the train all was confusion and excitement. The sudden checking of the train's speed, with the warning whistle and whirring of the slipping wheels; casting more than half the passengers forward from their seats, had at first given the impression of some serious accident, but then the rapid detonation of firearms, rising above the sound of escaping steam and crushing sand, closely followed by that terrible explosion, told one and all that something even more startling was in the wind.

Strong men were crouching low down between the seats, clumsily seeking to conceal their valuables; others were whimpering like terrified schoolboys, in dread of they knew not what; a few were thrusting their pistols out at the windows and wasting their lead on the insensate rocks and sands, with blind impartiality, and least of all in number, others sat in silence, weapons in readiness for use when actual occasion should present itself.

"The James Boys!" cried one quavering voice as the end door opened, and two figures entered the first coach. "Lord have mercy on us poor sinners now!"

No more potent combination of words could have been formed from all the letters found between the boards of the largest unabridged dictionary than that fear-sired sentence.

Faces which had been pale before now turned ghastly. Firearms were dropped, purses were flung forth—all seemed inspired by the one sentiment: a desire to propitiate the terrible desperadoes whose names had just been enunciated.

A short, mocking laugh came from the blackened lips of one of the twain, as this terrified speech came to his ears, and then his clear voice rung out sharply:

"James Boys nothing! No such good luck! Brace up and act a little more like men, unless your sand has all run out at the toes of your boots. There's no danger; but even if there was, just think of the circus you're making of yourself—and before a lady, too!"

"It's all right, gentlemen," added the excited conductor, no doubt believing that he was claiming no more than his just dues. "The train was attacked, the bridge blown up, but we beat the rascals off, and all danger's past. The desperate scoundrels haven't made much out of us *this* bout!"

There was a grim smile curling the lip of the stranger as he listened to this speech, but then he thrust his head out of one of the open windows, and after a single glance along the track, he withdrew it and grasping the bell-rope, tugged at it sharply, imperiously giving the signal to slow up and stop.

"We're at the station, Mr. Teeson," he cried, tapping the conductor on the shoulder. "I'm afraid you'll find the agent in a bad way, or else my ears deceived me when I listened to the plotting of those rascals."

"Here we are. Look to your weapons, gentlemen. It's barely possible that the gang divided, to take all the chances. Let the cowards stay behind; the white men will follow me."

Before the train had fairly stopped, he leaped out upon the narrow platform which extended along the front of the little station, both hands armed.

He was quickly followed, for the passengers were really an average lot, and only required a leader; but to all seeming the diminutive station was deserted.

The signal-light was in its proper place, but the door of the building was closed, and as the lantern of the conductor was flashed across it and the window, all could see that the telegraph wires had been cut and torn away.

"Kick down the door, some of you!" cried the stranger. "Half a dozen of you fellows string out ahead and to the rear of the train, with eyes open and tools ready. Halt any and every thing you see in the shape of a human being, and sink a lead shaft into all who don't halt and elevate at the first cry. Lively, now! Business in a minute, boys!"

Rude and blunt enough, this speech, but it proved contagious, and feeling that they had a man at their head, the passengers obeyed without murmur or hesitation.

A dozen stout hands grasped a wheeled truck which stood upon the platform, and dashed it against the door with all the power they could summon. Once, twice, thrice, and the shattered

barrier gave way, hurled from its bent hinges, and the conductor leaped across the threshold, flashing the light of his lantern before him, only to halt and stagger back with a gasping cry of mingled horror and indignation.

Little marvel that this should be.

Standing erect behind the low counter, as though waiting for a customer, was the agent; but there was a discolored spot in the center of his forehead, with a red line leading down the bridge of his nose, formed by the few drops of blood which had oozed from a bullet-wound that must have proved instantly fatal. And yet a keen knife had been swept across his throat from ear to ear, as though his brutal murderers were bound to make assurance doubly sure.

In his clammy, blood-bespattered fingers were a package of tickets, a penholder was placed crosswise in his mouth, held in place, and the lower jaw kept from dropping, by a pin being thrust through the lips and then bent upward.

Sickened and faint at heart the conductor reeled back and grasped the nearest shoulder for support, a husky oath and bitter vow hissing across his parched lips.

"By Jupiter! I swear to get even for this if it takes me a lifetime! Heavens! what a horrible sight! Poor Mike! Gently boys!" and recovering his powers with a desperate effort, he pushed forward and assisted the train-men in caring for the corpse.

"Poor Mikel! He was as white as they make 'em, and they've treated him worse than they could a mad dog. Hell's fires scorch their cowardly bones from this to all eternity! And may mine be the hand that sends them there!"

Fierce, bitter words, but few were they who gazed upon that diabolical mockery but who felt in the mood for echoing them to the very letter. Yet few words were uttered just then, as they lent their aid to compose the limbs of the murdered man, for they knew how near and dear had been the ties of friendship which bound the agent and conductor together, and in the presence of his fierce grief they could say naught.

Outside, the men under the stranger performed the duty assigned them to the best of their ability, and now that the first benumbing effects of the unexpected surprise had died away, few among them but longed to see the enemy approaching, if only to give them the opportunity to assert their briefly forgotten manhood.

But this was not to be. Foiled in their carefully laid plans, it seemed as though the train-wreckers had given over their project for good and all. Not a living soul was to be seen along the iron way save those whom the coaches had vomited forth, and as though satisfied of this, the stranger to whom it appeared they allowed their present safety, left his volunteer command on duty while he returned to the depot.

The train-men were just bearing the body of the slaughtered agent to the express-car, and he silently watched them, his stern-set face looking paler than ever through the stains of dirt and soot from the fire which had showered over his person in that short, desperate run to avert the wreck.

"A sad, strange affair!" uttered a low voice at his elbow, apparently addressing him. "Who can tell what it all is about? Is there any connection between this and the explosion which occurred just ahead?"

"Just as surely as that one and one make two," was the dry response, as the stranger cast a swift searching glance into the face of his questioner.

A tall, neatly dressed man below the middle age; his face close-shorn, his hair well-trimmed, a silk hat upon his head, a narrow white tie around his upright collar, giving him a sedate, clerical appearance. And yet, though so trim and gentlemanly, that garb seemed rather assumed for the occasion than one for which nature had designed the wearer, or, at least, such was the mental summing up of the stranger.

"Then you think it was a deliberate attempt to wreck the train?" quickly interjected the other, his black eyes flashing.

"I don't think anything about it," dryly; "I know."

"Hal then you're the man who gave the warning, and—"

"Who's the man?" demanded the conductor, sharply, catching the hasty speech as he stepped out of the coach into which the corpse of his friend had been placed. "Where is he?"

"This gentleman, I believe—" began the clerical-looking person, with a motion of one gloved hand toward the stranger, only to be unceremoniously thrust aside by the conductor, who peered into the face of the man indicated, turning the light of his lantern upon it at the same time.

"Who are you, anyhow?" he demanded, excitedly.

"A fool, perhaps," with a mocking laugh. "I lost a gold watch and chain, besides spoiling a suit of clothes. Do you reckon the company will make my loss good?"

"Rebel George, as I'm a sinner!" cried the conductor.

CHAPTER II.

REBEL GEORGE EXPLAINS.

"YOURS truly, captain," with a short nod and shorter laugh. "I'm truly glad to see you with your wits fully restored, for if ever you had need of them, it is now and here."

"Isn't it enough to knock any man off his base? Not only the attack of those devils, but poor Mike—may Satan make the bed of his assassins!"

"Which he'll take pleasure in doing, no doubt, when they knock at the door of his hostelry; but, unluckily for all honest men, they haven't got that far along, yet, and it's with the living we have to deal, just now."

"What does it all mean, anyhow? Can you explain it?"

"Simply that Elephant Tom has tired of working the stage lines, and is trying to emulate the illustrious Jesse and Frank James."

"Then it was really a plot to wreck the train?"

"Has it taken this long to get that idea through your brain?" a little impatiently. "Man alive, you'll never do for this git-up-and-git country. And I'm not much better, come to think, or I'd be acting instead of talking. While we're wasting time, there's no telling what those hell-hounds may be up to. Come, Teeson will you take the lead, or shall I?"

"You, if you will," replied the conductor, his voice sounding husky and strained. "That sight—poor Mike—I'm all broken up—Heaven's curses blight the fiends!"

"All right. I'll do the best I know how," and Rebel George, as he had been called, turned toward the passengers who had flocked around, eager to hear and see all that could by any possibility explain what had transpired.

"Gentlemen, you hear; Captain Teeson requests me to take the lead in this little affair. I want a dozen good men, who are armed, and who know how to use their tools, in case of necessity. The rest of you will please remain here with the train, and suffer no stranger to approach without halting him until he can give a satisfactory record. Those who care to follow my lead, please step forward."

There was no lack of volunteers, for the cool, decisive demeanor of Rebel George quickly won over his hearers. In place of having to repeat his request, he had to decline nearly half the number who advanced, so as not to leave the train without a sufficient guard.

"You do me proud, gentlemen," he said, with a little laugh and a bow, as he quickly selected the number of men he had indicated. "But really there is little likelihood of my needing even all of these I have selected. We are simply going to take a walk over to the crossing, where you came so near changing cars for—heaven or the other place!"

"You think we'll find those demons?" eagerly asked Teeson, his black eyes glowing redly.

"No, I don't," was the prompt response. "By the light of the explosion, I saw the rascals making tall tracks for cover, and I reckon they concluded they had bitten off rather more than they could chew. They are reckless rascals enough, when the odds are all in their favor, but let the scales once tip against them, and prairie dogs couldn't hunt their holes more rapidly than those same gentry."

"Still, they may be skulking around, and it would be some faint satisfaction if we could pick up one or two, just to ornament the telegraph poles with, as a hint of what they all may expect when they are rounded up."

"Business, now. You see the wires are down, and the instruments in yonder smashed beyond all use. Send men back to keep any other train from running into you here. Bring all your spare lanterns and a couple of men whom you can trust to cross over and run to Bocca with the news, or we'll have the down train pitching into the ditch."

Conductor Teeson gave the necessary orders, and then the little force of volunteers, under command of Rebel George, set out along the track toward the ruined bridge.

Flatly refusing to give any further explanation of the curious affair just then, Rebel George pushed on ahead of the lanterns, pistols in hand, as a sort of advance scout, but before the crossing was reached the party saw him standing beside the track, the body of a man lying at his feet.

"Here's one grain of consolation for the loss of poor Mike, Teeson," he muttered, with a grim laugh, as the conductor came up, stirring the corpse with his toe as he spoke.

The light of a lantern was flashed into the face, showing a mask of black stuff, through the apertures in which now stared the sightless eyes.

With trembling fingers the conductor tore away the mask, and a sharp cry broke from his lips as he started back.

"You know the fellow it seems?" muttered Rebel George, with a peculiar light in his black eyes. "Who is he?"

"Ned Burke, a brakeman on the road, who was discharged for drunkenness while on duty, less than a month ago."

"And he took this chance of getting even

with the company, no doubt. Well, he's got his final discharge, now."

"You killed him?"

"Maybe. If so, I'll sleep none the less sound."

Without another word, Rebel George turned away and darted ahead of the lanterns once more. A few rods further on, the scene was almost exactly duplicated; a second corpse was discovered and recognized by the conductor and train-hands.

Then the bank of the stream was gained, without a living person being met or seen by any of the party, outside of their own ranks.

For a few moments they stood in silence, turning the rays of the lantern upon the scene of ruin and destruction, the full force of which they had too narrowly escaped for them to readily find words to express their thoughts.

Right thoroughly had the train-wreckers accomplished this portion of their work. The bridge was a mass of ruins. The heavy timbers had been shattered and hurled in splinters for rods around. Not a rail or cross-tie, not a beam or stringer, remained in place. A splintered pile or two still stood upright: but nothing more.

"Your train wouldn't have stood much show, if it had been on the bridge when that little squib went off."

"And it would have been there, only for your bold action, George!" huskily cried Teeson, firmly grasping his hand between both of his own. "Not alone for myself, but for Nellie and the kids, I thank you. Some day I'll try to say more, but now—"

"You have something of more importance to do," impatiently interposed Rebel George, releasing his hands. "You want to send word to Bocca, in a hurry, too. I'd volunteer, but I've had enough water in mine to last for one day. Pick your man."

Teeson was saved this trouble, by two of the train-hands volunteering to carry the message. They knew that there might be danger in the service, but they were ambitious, and knew that they would lose nothing by having their names figure prominently in the report which must be sent to head-quarters.

One of the lanterns was hung from a stout stick planted close to the edge of the river, and then the party turned back toward the station. There was nothing they could do more, as it was clear enough to all that the train-wreckers had taken to flight, as soon as they saw their hopes of plunder were frustrated.

"How did you come to be mixed up in this sad affair?" asked Teeson, of Rebel George, as the party walked along.

"Curiously enough, now that I've got time to think it all over," was the slow response. "You know I'm hanging out, for the present, at Durango? Well, last night the pasteboards made an almighty bad break, and luck went cross-ways with me from the word git-up. I stuck to the tiger, tooth and toe-nail, until I saw that I hadn't the ghost of a chance to clip its claws, then drew out and sought the downy."

"But black luck followed me to bed, and I couldn't see or think of anything save those confounded cards coming out just contrary to reason, every time I backed my opinion, and it's mighty little rest I got there."

"With all this, you may judge I was not a laggard in bed. I'd made up my mind to try an old and favorite recipe of mine to break the streak of bad luck—to go a-fishing."

"I did go, and here you have the results."

"But how? What first roused your suspicions?"

"Catching a glimpse of some fellows fooling around the bridge. You see, I had caught all the fish I cared about, and that was enough to break a dozen unlucky streaks. I was too tired and my string too heavy to think of lugging it back to town, so I struck across the bend, intending to flag the train as it neared the bridge."

"I reckon it was lucky for me that I caught a glimpse of some fellows monkeying around the bridge, before I fairly showed myself, else we might even now be winging our way through the balmy ether, up yonder, in company, or else catching our first sniff of genuine, unadulterated sulphur and brimstone, fresh from the kitchen of his majesty, King Satan!"

"They didn't see you, then?"

"Not a see, else I'd hardly be in fit condition to tell the tragic tale. It was a curious bit of luck, too, when you view it critically. The first glance showed me a black face, and like a revelation, I felt that there was devilry in the air. Yet, as we both know, there are two or three niggers among the bridge hands, and the face I saw might easily enough be one of them. Just at that time I didn't remember this, and when it did come into my mind, I'd found out enough of the black truth to stick to the right scent."

"My first idea was to strike over to Bocca, since I was on that side of the drink, and have the operator send word to catch your train in time; but even as I started, I saw that the track was guarded; more than that, I saw a rascal shinning up a telegraph pole, and had no doubt but that the wires were being cut."

"The pot was beginning to get hot, and I felt something like I do when I lock horns with a slick professor from the Academy of Cut and Shuffle; bound to come out just a leetle ahead, though I had to skin my eye-teeth and stake my last pair of old socks!

"It didn't require any vast amount of reasoning to tell me which train they were laying for. I knew yours came next on the schedule, and that you carried the mail and express. It was hardly reasonable to think they would be taking so much trouble, and running such risk, merely for fun or revenge; and aside from those two incentives, there was only left the hope of plunder.

"When I saw the track guarded, and the wires cut, toward Bocea, I knew that I had no business in that direction, if I counted on cheating the bloody-minded rascals out of their fun, and so I crawled for a bit, until I could turn without fear of being discovered, and so reach the bed of the river.

"There was not more than an hour, before you would be due at the crossing, and as I had a vague suspicion that I would find Florida station in possession of the enemy, I knew there was scant time to do my work, without going to sleep on the way, either. And at the same time, I dared not make a careless move, for I was just conceited enough to believe that on my efforts your safety or destruction depended.

"Well, I crossed the drink, and was stealing along, thinking only of getting to Florida as quickly as possible without being discovered, when I almost ran my nose against two fellows who were standing against a rock, talking together.

"It was a mighty close shave; but luckily for me, they were too busy to notice me as I slipped back, and sticking my head under a bush, I listened to what they were saying.

"There's no need of repeating all they said, though I reckon I could give it word for word if crowded. Enough that I found out as much, or more, of how matters stood as I could by going on to the station.

"In fact, one of the rascals was just from there, and was giving in his report as I stumbled over them. He said that all had gone to perfection; that they had settled the agent and cut the wires, besides smashing up his instruments so that there could be no using them in a hurry."

"Curse the hell-hounds!" grated Teeson, his eyes glowing, his hands tight-clinched, his whole frame quivering with ill-suppressed fury and grief. "I'll get square with them some day for this bit of work."

"Amen!" ejaculated Rebel George, with fervor. "May I be there to see and hold your hat, if I can't do anything else."

"Go on; tell the rest. I couldn't help putting in when I thought of poor old Mike," huskily added Teeson.

"There's not much to tell but what you can guess at close enough after what you've heard and seen," resumed Rebel George, in a more earnest tone than he had before used. "My first idea was to slip past these two precious scoundrels and hasten beyond Florida, where I could give you timely warning by means of a flag or fire; but scarcely had the project been formed than it was knocked higher than a kite."

"The track was guarded clear beyond the station, and I knew that I wouldn't have spare time enough to make a wide circumbendibus and then reach the track beyond them before you were due at the crossing. It was an infernal muddle, and for a few moments I debated whether or no I should pull and plug those two devils, and leave the rest to fate. It was a powerful temptation, sure enough, for, though no names were mentioned, and both men wore black masks, I had a shrewd suspicion that one of them was no less than Elephant Tom himself. The description fitted him to a t-y-ty, and I believe I would have salivated him only for a few words they let drop just as they turned to go away."

"That was about blowing up the bridge with a time-fuse, cut to have the explosion just as the train reached the crossing, or a trifle before, since it would be impossible to stop the train in time to prevent a wreck."

"I saw the horrible picture dancing before my eyeballs as they turned away, and I lay there, sick at the stomach as a dog after a close interview with an essence peddler on four legs. But that didn't last long."

"When it passed away I saw what I had to do. I might fail by getting rubbed out, but nothing less could prevent me from warning the train in time to foil those merciless demons."

"I crept along until I could overlook the track. Lying low, I watched as keenly as I knew how, and soon saw enough to convince me that I had no fool of a job cut out."

"All the same, I didn't weaken worth a cent, and by carefully skirmishing around I picked up enough dry grass and twigs to form a sizable torch, with a paper or two which I chanced to have about me. These I tied to the end of my fishing-rod butt, and when I saw your headlight I struck a match and pulled the throttle wide open."

"As for what followed, you know it as well

as I can tell you. Lucky, too, for here we are at the station."

Even as Rebel George uttered his last words, the passengers flocked around Conductor Teeson, pelting him with questions innumerable as to the explosion, and the prospects of their being able to continue their journey.

The bridge is down, and no train can cross until that is repaired, of course. The wires are cut, so we can send no message. I have sent word on to the next station, and if the wreckers have not got in their dirty work there, the affair will be telegraphed to Durango. That may bring an engine, but even if it should there's the river to cross. As for this train, I am going to run it back to La Boca, where I can dispatch for a wrecking train. Then—we'll see how highly the company values the lives of its faithful servants. Poor Mike shall be avenged if money can accomplish anything."

"If the company makes the stake high enough I don't know but what I might be tempted to go for it," quietly uttered Rebel George. "I haven't indulged myself in a regular man-hunt since I crawled out of the 'last ditch' in '65."

"If you do, I'll see that your efforts are fitly rewarded, old fellow. But time's up. You're coming with us?"

"Not to-night. I've got to get back to Durango."

"Going to cross the river and take the chances of a train or count ties, eh?"

"Not any, thank you. I've got a handier way, and I don't hanker after any more dampness or tie-trotting this evening."

In a few, swift words Teeson gave his passengers their choice between sticking to the train and taking their chances, or crossing the river, then leaped aboard, and the train pulled out for a back station.

A hand was laid softly on Rebel George's shoulder, and, wheeling sharply, he recognized the clerical-looking gentleman who had addressed him before the ruined bridge was visited. The same, yet with a difference. Now his keen, black eyes were hidden behind smoked-glass spectacles, his actions were as soft and subdued as his voice, while both were in perfect keeping with his garb.

"Pardon me, sir, but did I not hear you say that you had a way by which you could reach Durango without waiting for a train from the other side?"

"And if you did?" dryly asked Rebel George, who seemed to have taken an unaccountable dislike to the man.

"Allow me to explain. But first, my card," murmured the gentleman in black, with a meek bow, and as he extended a bit of paste-board.

Rebel George accepted it, and glanced at the words printed thereon. It formed a name of which he had never heard.

"Mr. Albert Matney. Well, what can I do for you?" he said bluntly, first reading the name, then looking keenly into the man's face.

"If I seem abrupt and unceremonious, I pray you, my dear sir, attribute it to the urgency of the case which makes me address you thus. I assure you—"

"That you are cutting a good many words to waste," impatiently interposed Rebel George, with an outward fling of his hand that cast the card far across the track. "If you have any favor to ask, out with it in a lump."

He stood directly beneath the rays of the signal-light, and despite the dirt and soot which stained his face, he did not present an unpleasant picture thus to those who knew what he had that night accomplished.

He was barely up to the mean height of the American race, rather slenderly built than stout, yet even a casual observer could hardly fail to note the perfect symmetry of his body and limbs, while those who knew him best said that Rebel George was all steel and grit, whenever the occasion arose, and a terribly bad man to tackle in deadly earnest.

His hair was worn long and flowing, but straight as though the blood of the red-man flowed in his veins. A heavy pair of mustaches covered his mouth and lips, the ends almost touching his chest as he stood erect. His eyes were large, jet-black, and unusually keen. His complexion was dark, but clear. His garb was rough, with a pair of wading-stockings covering his lower limbs to the waist. A belt encircled his middle, supporting a brace of pearl-handled revolvers and a knife.

His brows were unpleasantly contracted as he gazed fixedly into the face of the man whom he had so decidedly snubbed, and his lip curled as that worthy, after a brief hesitation, said, hurriedly:

"It is a favor, and yet one for which you can ask almost your own price. You spoke of having a method of reaching Durango to-night. If it is by horseback, name its price, and I'll pay it. If by a wheeled vehicle, which will not carry more than three, I make the same offer. If large enough for four or more, can money hire three seats in it?"

"Are you speaking for yourself, or for another?"

"For my employer, who is very anxious to reach—"

"Matney! Where the deuce are you?" cried a

sharp, angry voice, and at the sound Rebel George wheeled in the direction from whence it proceeded, a strange glow filling his eyes.

"Here, Mr. Adair," hurriedly responded the gentleman in black, springing forward and pausing before the speaker, a tall, thin personage, on whose arm hung the veiled figure of a woman. "I have heard of a way of reaching Durango to—"

"And it is wholly at your service, my dear sir," said Rebel George, advancing, his stern voice now low and soft.

CHAPTER III.

FOXY BRANSCOMBE GOES A-WOOLING.

NOT the least remarkable among the mining-towns of the far Southwest, is that known as Durango, be it either for wild life or natural advantages.

A thing of mushroom growth—springing up from the heart of the desert in a night, as it were—nevertheless, it "came to stay."

On the thirteenth day of September, 1880, the first stake in its survey was driven home. In a week, it was a mining-camp quite as much as "the end of the road." In a month, it became a town. Six months from the time the first line was run, Durango was a city, whose inhabitants could be counted up among the thousands.

No longer a mushroom, but with its future success and prosperity fully assured, if only by its unusual natural advantages, Durango differed from the generality of mining-towns in more than one respect.

There is little of sentiment to be found in the every-day life and business dealings of either railway pioneers or mineral prospectors. As a rule, their stations or camps are pitched upon with an eye single to combined convenience and profit, and one in quest of the lovely and picturesque in nature, rarely finds it within those confines.

Durango was and is one of the rare exceptions to the general rule. The young giant of the mighty Southwest is situated in La Pinta county, some eighteen miles north of the State line between Colorado and New Mexico, and sixty miles east of the Utah border, in the valley of the Añinos river.

The location of the town can hardly be surpassed for natural beauty. It is in a valley, two or three miles wide in places, rising in gentle *steppes* or *mesas* on either side, back to superb bluffs, the loftiest among which tower to a height of from fifteen hundred to two thousand feet above the level, broken up into the most fantastic outlines, giving very picture-que effects.

The center of a mining-region; to the north, the marvelous San Juan country; South-eastern Utah; Northeastern Arizona; Northwestern New Mexico; sufficiently distant from Denver to protect it from actual competition with the Prairie Metropolis, and to render it the independent monarch of the Pacific slope of the mountains, with a tributary country hundreds of miles in extent, containing a wealth of soil, of lumber and of mines almost unequalled; with an immense coal supply, the nearest to the mines of any, suitable for smelting purposes; with the topography of the surrounding country, and the different character of the ores in the various outlying mining-camps—little marvel that Durango looked happy and prosperous on that afternoon in early spring.

"Yet there's room for lots of improvement, and with the proper kind of boss, whose name I could spell with my eyes shut, this same rough mining-camp could give even Denver a black eye, even if it didn't knock her clean out of time."

The words were audibly uttered, but only the ears of the speaker drank them in. Had others been within range, the sentiment might have existed, all the same, but it would never have found articulated birth.

If Dirigo Branscombe was anything he was secretive. His eyes, his nose, his mouth, his every feature proclaimed this trait to all who chose to read.

At the first glance one considered him a handsome man. At the second, a doubt found birth, while still another flatly reversed the primal verdict.

Of medium height, average build, middle age. With features sharp and clean-cut. Hair trimmed closely; short whiskers on the upper jaw-bones, with chin, throat and lips clean-shorn. In the shade, hair and whiskers showed a grizzled brown; when the sunlight sifted through them they took on another shade which, with the peculiar, vulpine cast of his features, gave him the title of "Foxy" Branscombe among the lawless and irreverent.

His garb was composed of the finest material money could purchase, and artistic skill was visible in every curve and line; yet the result was almost as disagreeable as a square look into the wearer's countenance. The colors and pattern were "loud." Though snugly-fitting, the garments were worn with a slouchy air, which marks the newly-risen parvenu. In spite of his pretensions, founded on hard cash, Dirigo Branscombe could never pass for a gentleman, among gentlemen.

"Let my schemes only work as they should—bah!" and a hissing, disagreeable laugh parted his thin lips, disclosing pointed rows of tobacco-stained teeth. "They must—they will go right! Failure is impossible. I have taken each step with too much care for that, and covered my traces so thoroughly that Satan himself could not scent me out. To-night—to-morrow—one week more; then—ha! ha!"

His white, but hardened palms grated together, the short, stumpy fingers twining and twisting in and out, the thin lips drew back from the discolored teeth with a wolfish grin that was almost a snarl, and there was a blazing, yet chilling, glow in the greenish-gray eyes.

Many of those who fancied they knew Dirigo Branscombe best, would have looked upon him in mute astonishment, could they have seen him at this moment. But it was only at long intervals, and when he was absolutely alone, that the great mining speculator suffered his actual self to show through the cunning mask he wore, night and day; and even now the weakness was only momentary. Then his face returned to its usual calm, grave, almost austere rigidity.

Descending from his lookout, Dirigo Branscombe passed leisurely through the town, nodding shortly to the many respectful greetings which he received from the citizens, pausing now and then to interchange a few words with those who had business to transact with him, either settling the matter off-hand, or else appointing an hour for an interview at his office, as the circumstances warranted.

A power in Durango was Dirigo Branscombe, and though his name came last on the sign-board which blazed in blue and gold before the office of Adair, Aiken & Branscombe, General Agents, who did "a land office business" in loaning money on unquestionable security, buying, selling and speculating in mining-claims and stocks, nearly all who had dealings with the "Triad," quickly learned to look upon him as the actual, if not nominal head of the company.

Through the town he passed, then his footsteps quickened, and now that there were none to look into his green eyes, that old, foxy glitter returned to them.

Up the first steppe and across the first plateau to the second, following a narrow trail which led through shrubbery and thick-lying rocks, his countenance resumed its grave blandness, and the vulpine eyes also resumed their mildest look.

Nestling amid the rocks and trees, was a small cabin of stone, up the face and over the roof of which clustered a wild grapevine, many years older than the structure it now ornamented, instead of the wind-stunted and sun-scorched tree which had witnessed its birth.

The door was open. From within came the low, musical notes of a fresh, young voice, humming a song of love and war, and with a benevolent smile wreathing his lips, Dirigo Branscombe paused and bent his head in listening.

Only for an instant. The song was abruptly hushed, and a half-stifled exclamation of annoyance came to his ears instead, telling the speculator only too plainly that his presence had been discovered, with anything but agreeable emotions on the part of the hidden songstress.

The thin lips drew back from the sharp teeth in an ugly snarl, and the green eyes shone like those of an irritated cat; but at the same instant the foxy face was bowed and hidden in the white folds of a highly-scented handkerchief, while an apologetic cough strangled the hot curse which strove to find exit.

A light, graceful form appeared in the doorway, standing as though to bar his entrance, while a quick voice spoke:

"Father is not at home, Mr. Branscombe."

A polite bow and bland smile checked her further speech.

"Indeed, Miss Bretto. I am sorry for that, as I wish to see him on very important business. Will he soon return?"

"Hardly before dark. He has gone fishing."

Short the speech, cold the manner, but it failed of its purpose. Dirigo Branscombe was not a man readily bluffed off from the course he had marked out for himself. Yet the dark, lovely face of the young girl before him grew lighter, as he spoke again:

"Too bad—too bad! My business is very urgent. But it cannot be helped, of course. Will you kindly inform your father that I called, and not finding him at home, requested him to call at the office, at his earliest convenience?"

"With pleasure."

"Thanks," with a bow. "May I trouble you for a sip of water? I walked as though for a wager, coming here, and am extremely thirsty."

With a celerity that might have been pure politeness, but which as certainly found birth in a feverish longing to hasten his departure, Miss Bretto receded from the door to procure the craved draught, only to hear the quick, cat-like foot-fall of her unwelcome visitor as he crossed the threshold after her, smiling more blandly than ever.

With a cold repugnance which she made not

the slightest effort to conceal, the girl handed him a glass of water. He accepted it with a bow, and sipping the contents, sunk into a chair, depositing his hat upon the table, saying smoothly:

"My rapid walk has fatigued me, and you look so cozy and comfortable in here that, really, I cannot resist the temptation. I trust I am not intruding?"

Those keen, foxy eyes might have easily read the answer in the face of the girl; but she seemed taken all aback by his matchless impudence, and without a word, retreated to the further side of the room, sinking into a chair.

"Thanks," with a bow as thankful as though she had expressed the utmost pleasure in his condescension. "You are so kind that I will impose upon your good nature for a few moments, if only to recover my breath. You say your father is not about the premises? Surely you are not here alone?"

"He went fishing early this morning."

"Leaving you all alone? That's too bad! Really, I must remonstrate with George, on—"

"I beg you will do no such thing," hastily interposed the girl, with a flushing countenance. "I am not neglected, as you seem to hint. Indeed, there are times when I am only too glad to be left alone by myself."

She paused short as those greenish eyes fixed her gaze; but there was nothing of fear, and little confusion in her spirited countenance as he supplemented:

"Of which the present occasion is one, you would say. Am I not right, my dear?"

"You are most decidedly wrong in calling me your dear, or your anything, however the other point stands," flashed Miss Bretto, rising from her chair, as though to end the interview.

"Even though you are very dear to my heart—"

"Have you such an article?" with a short, scornful laugh.

"I had before I met you; I have not now, unless, indeed, you have been gracious enough to intrust yours to my keeping."

The fellow's impudence was matchless. Calm and suave as ever was his voice, while his smile beamed more benevolently than at first, if that was possible.

The girl's face flushed hotly, then grew white as wax. Her dark eyes glittered with poorly concealed anger, and her white finger trembled as it pointed toward the door.

"You have said enough for once, Mr. Branscombe. There's the door. You found your way through it without an invitation; pray see if you can retrace your steps with the one I now give you. Is the hint sufficiently plain?"

"I never listen to a hint, my dear,"—with a smirk.

"Then I will give even more than a hint. Your presence is extremely disagreeable to me. I always disliked you; now I despise you. If you are wise you will not change that sentiment to hatred, or you may find yourself treated with still less ceremony."

Sharp and decisively she spoke, but instead of slinking away in confusion, Dirigo Branscombe gazed at her flushed countenance with his green eyes filled with admiration.

Rarely beautiful was Naomi Bretto just then. The excitement of the moment lent her otherwise too pale face a rich color, and added to the brilliancy of her large, eloquent eyes.

Slight and slender in build, she was below the average height of her sex; yet there was a fairy-like grace in her every movement, a lithe suppleness in her delicately-rounded limbs and person, that possessed a charm far beyond mere voluptuousness in the judgment of those who looked for something beyond mere animal charms. She was one to respect at first, then admire, and finally love with a love that included the soul as well as person.

But little was known to the general public concerning her former life or antecedents. When Durango was first surveyed for a town, the little, stone cabin was nestling there in solitude without a neighbor nigh, inhabited only by those two: Rebel George Bretto and his daughter Naomi.

To that day but little more was known concerning the girl, though Rebel George quickly became one of the celebrities of the bustling mining-camp and railway terminus. An unusually bold and skillful short-card player, he never met with his match among the independent knights of the painted pasteboards, and the day quickly arrived when, but for an occasional adventurer from some outside point whither his fame had extended, Rebel George could find no man bold enough to engage him across the board. As a result he turned to the faro-tables, there proving far less successful, though still managing to keep "ahead of the game" mainly through his indomitable pluck and unvarying coolness.

He was a natural born gambler. He could not live without the excitement of play. It ran in his blood, he said, and he came honestly by the passion. With this, too, he had all the curious superstitions of the genuine gambler; the belief in good and evil omens, of spells to break the force of one, or confirm the other; in a

word, he was a curious mixture of good and evil, of sense and folly.

Foxy Branscombe followed the direction of the extended finger with his eyes, but made no motion toward a bodily exit.

"My dear, adorable creature," he cried, showing his discolored teeth in a smile that was almost a snarl, though his voice was smooth and oily as ever; "you can't imagine how hugely delighted I am to hear you speak after that blunt fashion. It gives me the confidence which I might otherwise have failed to find."

"You heard my words; you could not fail to comprehend their import. Will you have the grace to leave me?"

Cold and cutting the tones, but the words had no more effect upon the thick-skinned speculator than if they had never found birth.

"Ordinarily, a gentleman does not like to confess himself a liar, especially where there is a lady in the case, but since you have spoken so frankly, I will be equally open and above-board. I deceived you when I said I came here to see your father on business. I knew that he was absent, that there was scant danger of his returning before I could have my say out, else my visit would have been postponed until a more favorable opportunity. Instead I came to see you—to avow my passion, to receive your tender, bashful confession, and settle on the important day which is to wrap us both in bliss."

Slowly the flush died out of the maiden's countenance as she listened to this cool, insulting speech, and fairly bewildered by the matchless audacity of the speculator, she sunk back into her chair.

"Mad—drunk—one or both, he must be!" fell mechanically from her lips, as Foxy Branscombe ceased speaking and leant forward in his chair, hands on knees, his green eyes fixed with a mocking glitter upon her face.

"Guilty, on both counts, my dear," he smiled, nodding. "Mad—with love for your dainty self. Drunk—with ditto for ditto. Be my physician. Cure me ere I perish. The precious antidote is in your eyes, on your lips—"

"In my hand, you sneering scoundrel!" flashed Naomi, darting across the room and snatching a small calibered revolver from a shelf against the wall, raising the hammer and covering her unwelcome visitor with the rapidity of thought. "Go! not another word, or, by the Lord who made me! I'll send a bullet through your crafty, scheming brain! Go, I tell you!"

Dirigo Branscombe crouched still lower in his seat, his wiry limbs apparently in readiness for a sudden leap aside or forward, as necessity should demand. His shaggy brows twitched and quivered. His greenish eyes blazed vividly. His thin, parchment-colored lips drew aside, and his yellow teeth bared themselves in a wolfish grin.

But in it all, there could be detected no trace of positive fear, though he must have known that his life hung upon a thread; for if ever mortal being was in deadly earnest, Naomi Bretto was when she uttered that threat.

"Shoot, and you kill the man you have until to-day believed your father. Slay me, and you are washing your hands in his heart's blood."

For a brief space, Naomi Bretto stood irresolute. The silver drop covered the forehead of Dirigo Branscombe. Her forefinger clasped the trigger, needing but an added ounce of pressure to release the death-missile. The speculator stood nearer the door of death than ever before in his eventful life, nearer than he ever would again, without fairly crossing the portals.

Yet he did not flinch. His foxy smile grew broader. He knew that his swift shaft had struck its mark; that his wonderful audacity had gained him a respite.

Nor was he deceived in this. Naomi lowered her weapon, though still keeping the hammer raised and her finger on the trigger.

"Once more, will you begone! I do not know why I stop to warn you a second time—"

"Shall I tell you?" laughed Branscombe. "Because you are burning with curiosity to know who is to take the place of Rebel George as your father, since he proves a pretender."

"You lie in that, as in all else!" cried Naomi, passionately. "I am a silly fool to listen to you even for a moment."

"Yet you do listen; and listen you will, until I have fully unfolded my little budget of wonders. You would not be a woman, else," sneered the speculator.

A sudden change came over the young woman's face, and all traces of passion vanished as by magic, leaving her cold and composed. Her voice rung out cuttingly as she spoke again:

"You are right, Mr. Branscombe. I will listen. You will unfold your little budget of wonders. You will explain your object in coming here and forcing yourself upon one who as plainly as words could, showed that you were an unwelcome visitor. You will tell me what you meant, when you hinted that my father is not my father. You will do all this—and more. You will occupy that same chair until the coming of George Bretto, when I will cheerfully leave him to reward you as you conduct richly deserves."

"You are very kind, my dear," with a sneer.

The girl resumed her former seat, quietly adding:

"In addition to that, I am as sure a shot as my father. You are given credit for being nobody's fool, and can interpret the significance of that fact without my saying more."

"In plainer words, you will sink a mineral shaft into my brain, if I try to escape?" grinned Foxy Branscombe.

"You should have been born a Yankee," with a short bow.

"Nevertheless, I can fully appreciate your kindness, even though I fail to recognize its necessity. I assure you, my dear, I have not the slightest inclination or idea of running away from such a charming hostess. And I also flatter myself that when I shall have finished my little revelation, you will be as eager to keep me beside you, as you were to hasten my departure, but a few moments since."

"Until my father comes, I will entertain you cheerfully."

"The assassin of your father and mother, you mean?"

CHAPTER IV.

HOW THE WOOING PROSPERED.

SHARPLY, viciously he shot forth the words, leaning forward to note their effect, his greenish eyes glittering like those of a venomous serpent, his thin lips curling away from his discolored teeth, his actual self fully revealed, as though he no longer felt the necessity of wearing a mask.

Brave and self-reliant though the girl undoubtedly was, and thoroughly nerved, though she believed she was to bear for the present with his insolent speech, the cruel shaft took her entirely by surprise, and struck deeply home.

The pistol drooped from her unnerved hand, and she slunk back in her chair, staring at him with white face and eyes filled with horror.

Dirigo Branscombe laughed softly, mockingly, as he noted the effects of his words. Better for him, perhaps, and he enjoyed his triumph with less ostentation, for as that sneering merriment rung in her ears, Naomi Bretto rallied her stunned powers, and recovering the pistol, thrust it forward with finger on the trigger, her eyes ablaze, her voice strained and unnatural, as the words dropped swiftly from her lips:

"Unsay those words—take them back, and admit that you lie in your throat, like the cowardly cur that you are—or by the heavens above! I'll wipe out the foul insult to an honest man, in your life-blood!"

"Shoot—and Rebel George will hang as surely as those same heavens are above us!"

A brief period of breathless silence, during which the weight of a hair would have turned the scales forever against Dirigo Branscombe. Yet he never flinched, never ceased smiling, never turned the ghost of a shade more yellow. Whatever else he may have been, Foxy Branscombe assuredly was no coward.

Those glittering eyes seemed to hold her dark orbs spell-bound, slowly, but surely gaining the mastery. The long lashes began to quiver, the extended hand to tremble. Then it slowly sunk to her lap once more, and Dirigo Branscombe straightened his form up, with a long breath hissing through his teeth:

"My adorable creature, haven't you tested my nerve quite sufficiently to be convinced that I don't scare worth a cent? Wouldn't it be just as well for you to lay that foolish toy aside for the present?"

Naomi Bretto laughed shortly, hardly.

"You are very brave, with only a poor, weak girl to face. But when father comes—when you have a man to deal with, your ugly face will blanch, your limbs tremble with craven fear as you meekly beg for mercy."

"If by father you mean Rebel George, doubtless there will be trembling and cringing; but it will not be my head that is bowed in the dust, not my voice that is raised in prayers and pleading for mercy; you can depend on that, my precious."

"You lie most foully when you dare to couple his name with crime, or aught that is not kind, generous, noble!"

"Think you so?" laughed the speculator, easily. "Well, so be it, then. Rest in that belief while you may, for the hour of your awakening is close at hand, and you will require all your strength and courage to confront the dread truth."

"Was it for the purpose of pouring these foul lies and hints into my ears that you came here this afternoon?"

"Not wholly—indeed, I meant not to touch the subject; nor did I until you forced me to do so in self-defense. I came to offer you another arm to lean upon, before that which you have so long considered your support should be taken from you forever. I hinted as much, I believe, but you took fire and flashed out so viciously, that I had no option but to don my safeguard to avoid being riddled."

"Rather to insult a girl whom you believed was wholly defenseless!" flashed Naomi. "Tell the truth, if it does shame your friend and patron saint."

"A man may serve many a worse master,"

laughed Branscombe, in no wise disconcerted by the stinging taunt. "He has rewarded my poor efforts right nobly, and stood my friend in many a tight pinch. I would be the blackest of ingrates were I to deny him at this late day."

"But this is not business, and business brought me here."

"You cut me short when I attempted to gently and considerately break the ice a bit ago. I will not try your further patience by finessing, but talk business instead."

"Though you do not mix much in society, such as it is which we have here, I take it for granted that you are not wholly ignorant of the position which I hold in life. I am nominally the junior partner in the firm of Adair, Aiken & Branscombe, but in reality I am the head and brains of the concern. I put in my practical experience against the cash of my partners, and as a matter of course, while they have been learning I have been winning. To-day I can count my fortune by hundreds of thousands. In a year I will rank high among the ranks of millionaires."

"Pray, why do you imagine that all this has any interest for me? Does your ill-gotten wealth make you any the less a scoundrel and contemptible villain?"

"Scoundrel and villain, if you fancy the terms, but never contemptible," retorted Branscombe, with admirable sangfroid. "No wealthy man is ever that, while the world remains so full of those who bow down in worship before the golden calf. But it was not my intention to boast, and since you ask why I mention my worldly prospects, you shall have a frank answer."

"Unfortunately for me, I am considerably older than you; old enough to be your father, in fact. In addition, I am a plain, blunt-speaking fellow, with few of those empty graces with which the hearts of lovely women are taken by storm. As a natural consequence, I wish to make the most of what advantages I do possess."

"I am rich, and will be richer. I am not exactly hideous in either face or person. I know enough to pass in a crowd. I have a heart big enough to hold all those whom I love, and who may love me in return. To my enemies or adversaries in the race for wealth I can be hard and cold as granite."

"To these qualities add one more: that I worship you as it is given to very few men to worship in this every-day world; that you are as precious to me as a draught of cool water to the shipwrecked mariner or the lost soul in the desert; that with you to share it with me this world will prove all the heaven I long for—without you, a hell!"

"Naomi, I ask you to become my wife."

There was no trace of sneering now. The words came out swift and passionate, hot and glowing with an intensity that was almost painful to witness. Dirigo was in deadly earnest, and his strong fingers trembled as they twined and twisted in and out, his white but horny palms audibly grating together as he leaned forward in his seat, his glittering eyes fixed upon the paling countenance of the maiden as she slowly slunk still further away from him, a vague, nameless terror deepening in her dark eyes—a terror such as one might fancy is felt by the feebly-fluttering bird that hovers helplessly above the death-fascinating serpent.

In truth, there was something of that strange, magnetic influence in those green-glowing eyes as they concentrated their rays. The maiden felt it—felt a cold numbness creeping over her, driving the warm blood from her limbs, dropping a misty veil over her brain, riveting her to the chair, even though she strove to flee as she felt, rather than saw, that hated, loathed face drawing closer, still nearer to her own.

A bold man was Dirigo Branscombe, and he was playing a bold game, where his tactics must be sharp and decisive. At any moment Rebel George Bretto might return home, and if won at all, the victory must be gained before that occurred.

He concentrated all his great will-power into that gaze. His green eyes fairly blazed. His thin lips drew apart and curled over his snaggy teeth with the tremendous efforts he was making. His face slowly advanced, his person followed, not the slightest sound attending his movements.

Like one helpless beneath the influence of some baleful drug, Naomi Bretto saw this, knew that he was stealing upon her, yet powerless to avoid him. Still, like one in a frightful dream, she felt his hot breath upon her face; felt his burning lips descend upon her own—then the benumbing spell was broken by that loathsome contact, and a wild scream burst from her oppressed lungs as she started back, her right hand tingling as though scorched, she could not say why.

A moment later she knew. Dirigo Branscombe sat rigid and erect in his chair, as though he had never vacated it; but on his right cheek was the impress of a human hand, rapidly growing red, significantly telling how the foul insult had been avenged.

"How dare you, coward!" panted Naomi, her voice choking.

"Terribly presumptuous, am I not?" with a

faint, constrained smile. "Old, ugly, blunt; young, lovely, graceful. All against me, and in your favor. Yet I have an excuse for my audacity—I love you! That gives me the courage to ask your hand in marriage, and—"

"To shamefully insult me when you found me weak and unnerved for the moment. But it shall be avenged most bitterly—I promise you that!"

"Bah! a kiss, more or less—what's the odds. When you're my wife you'll only be too willing to grant them."

By a violent effort Naomi Bretto recovered her wonted composure, resuming her seat opposite the speculator, holding the revolver upon her lap, with finger ready on trigger.

"Run to the length of your tether, and enjoy your freedom while it lasts, Mr. Branscombe," she said, her voice cold and measured in its accents. "No matter what you say, you can hardly increase the punishment in store. You are free to say what you will, but take warning—attempt to quit that chair, even for an instant, to advance or retreat, and I will shoot you down as I would a mad-dog. Is that sufficiently clear?"

"Bless your innocent soul, my darling jewel," laughed Foxy Branscombe, easily; "I have not the remotest idea of departing without receiving the first bashful kiss from my plighted spouse—"

"Your only bride will be death, and my father will conduct the ceremony."

"You are singularly forgetful, my dainty darling; your father is dead and long ago moldered to dust. Doubtless you have reference to his secret assassin, Rebel George Bretto, as he now calls himself."

"Bah!" with the intensest scorn. "Why repeat that infamously ridiculous accusation? Though an angel should descend from heaven to mouth the same foul charge, I would brand it as a lie of all lies!"

"I'm little angelic, to be sure, yet I am uttering gospel truth, as you will be forced to admit when Rebel George comes. You shall behold him cringe and cower before me—shall hear him admit the truth of the charges I bring—shall listen to his black and shameful confession. As I lift my finger he will sink and grovel at my feet, begging me to have mercy. I will prove to you that the man you have loved and revered for so long, is a red-handed outlaw and assassin, not the worst of whose crimes is the butchering of your actual parents when you were little more than a helpless babe at the breast. I will trace his blood-stained career from that period to the present day. I will wring from him full confession. You shall hear him admit that all I bring against him is gospel truth; that even this very day he has been engaged in outraging the laws of both heaven and earth."

"Then when your eyes are fairly opened, when you at last behold him as he really is, not as your fond imagination has ever pictured him, I will give you your choice—to become my wife and see him go free of justice, or behold him dragged to the gallows to suffer the penalty of a thousand crimes!"

Swiftly the words fell from his parchment-like lips, each one striking his hearer with the force of an actual blow from a clinched hand, yet his tones were cold, hard and measured, his countenance as impassive as though he had been some stern judge passing sentence upon a convicted criminal.

Naomi Bretto felt morally certain that he was falsifying in all that he uttered, yet despite this conviction, her heart grew sick, and she turned faint as she listened. Surely he would not dare utter such horrible threats without first making sure that he could support them! His web must be well woven before he would venture to threaten all this against a man like George Bretto.

She fought down the growing faintness, and looked him full in the face as he paused, apparently awaiting her answer.

"I say now, as I said before, you are lying. George Bretto is my father. He is as noble as you are base, as brave as you are craven-spirited, as pure as you are foul and all that is loathsome. So sure am I that you will never dare repeat those words in his hearing—listen:

"You ask me to marry you. When you put your threats into execution: when you utter those charges against one of God's noblemen, in his presence; when George Bretto admits that they are even founded on truth, or even listens to their utterance without smiting the perjured lips that give them shape, with his honest hand, then I will marry you! More: though I would sooner take a venomous rattlesnake to my bosom as a pet; rather caress a venom-swollen tarantula; more willingly bend the knee in adoration of the foul fiend himself; I swear to love, adore and reverence you as only a little less than an angel of purity, grace and holiness!"

"It is a vow, and I am the witness!" cried Dirigo Branscombe, his greenish eyes glittering with an unholy triumph. "Of your own accord you have bound yourself beyond all evasion. I will hold you to your pledge, never fear. Once your life is joined to mine the rest will follow. I never yet set my mind on attaining a point

without accomplishing it, and be sure I will not fail in this. You shall learn to love me, even against your own will. The time will come when you will look up to me as something more than a common man; when—"

"When you have fulfilled all the conditions I named," swiftly interposed the maiden, her face ashen pale, but her dark eyes glittering vividly as she fought down the rising terror that chilled her heart. "Do not forget that portion of the contract."

"I have an admirable memory, my precious," laughed the speculator, with a careless wave of one stumpy hand. "Shall I prove my assertion? Come, since we have to await the return of the worthy gentleman whom you have so long regarded as a parent, suppose I tell you the story of your real father and mother? Surely you are interested in learning all about them?"

"Since you must talk, as well on that subject as any other, I suppose," was the reply outwardly cold and even listless, but underneath that demeanor was hidden a world of agitation and powerfully conflicting emotions.

Naomi kept repeating in her mind that it was all a lie, false and base as the owner of the lips that formed them; yet, despite her utmost endeavor, the confident manner in which Foxy Branscombe spoke was not without its influence.

She remembered how often in the olden days she had ventured to question George Bretton concerning the days of her childhood, only to be abruptly hushed. She remembered, too, how dark and gloomy his brow would grow, how silent and constrained his manner after those exhibitions of childish curiosity, and that she had long since avoided the subject she scarcely knew why.

He had never mentioned the name of her mother, never recalled the past, never alluded to his wedded life. She was ignorant even of the name which her mother had borne in life.

If his past was clear as she had until now never doubted, would he have been so reticent?

Though her loyalty to the man whom she had called father from the earliest days of her recollection faltered not, even now, the maiden caught this query flitting across her brain.

It terrified her, and with a start, she flung out a hand, as though casting aside the ghost of a suspicion which she felt shamed her, even more than it wronged her parent.

Foxy Branscombe laughed softly, as though he had the power to read her inmost thoughts.

"It will take a more decided effort than that to clear away the cobwebs, my precious little elf. I admire your fidelity, because it promises well for my future, but I can't say as much for your acuteness of perception."

"Since it brands you as a cunning and unscrupulous liar, why should you?" with a cold sneer, the taunt restoring her composure.

"Have your own way, my dear," with a grin. "We never contradict your charming sex—until the key is turned in the lock. Then—'but sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.'"

"I promised you a leaf from the past. For fear the worthy hero of that little tragedy should make his appearance before the climax, I will make it as brief as I can, without entirely destroying its clearness and interest."

"Your parents—never mind their names just at this stage—were intimate acquaintances of the man who now passes as Rebel George; in fact, the lady was his first love, who once pledged herself to become his tappy bride, only to fall in love with and wed another while her original lover was absent on a tour of business."

"What made the blow all the more bitter, was the fact that Rebel George loved the man who had supplanted him, and gave him the place of a brother in his heart. Still worse, in starting on that protracted business jaunt, he placed the care and guardianship of the woman whom he so fondly hoped to make his wife in the hands of the false friend. He knew that she was silly, weak, fond of flirting, and one only too easily influenced by those about her. But he placed implicit confidence in his heart-brother, and departed with a light heart and no misgivings that he had placed his foolish little sheep in the keeping of a cunning, unscrupulous wolf."

"Your mother was quite wealthy in her own right; your father was a poor man, who found it difficult to keep up appearances in the class of society he mingled with; still he might not have so utterly betrayed his trust had not a rich relative suddenly died, leaving all his fortune to her. That made the temptation too great for him to resist, and there was a stolen wedding, a hasty flight, an utter vanishment, which no doubt was intended to be but temporary, while the storm raged fiercest."

"But from that day to this the veil which fell over them on that summer day has never been lifted, so far as their most intimate friends and their relatives are concerned."

"Rebel George came home to meet with a blow that laid him low for months; that utterly changed his nature, and made him what he has since become."

"When he recovered his health he also vanished, never to return. The strongest fears were entertained by those more intimately concerned, and strenuous efforts were made to find the fu-

gitives; but all in vain. They had vanished. It was as though the earth had opened beneath their feet and engulfed them."

"I don't suppose there are more than two men now living who can solve the mystery with which that affair is shrouded—Rebel George is one; I am the other."

"How he struck their trail would be too long a story to relate here. Enough that he did so at last. But they heard of his being on the trail at the same time, and then began a long and exciting game of hide and seek."

"Rebel George was the victor at last. He overtook them in the Far West, and their first meeting was their last. The great city of 'Frisco was startled by a terrible tragedy one fair morning. A handsome, stylish couple, plainly man and wife, were found dead in bed, side by side, tight-clasped in each other's arms, their throats cut, a knife thrust deep into each heart. In the hand of the man was found a knife, and at first it was supposed to be a case of suicide, as doubtless the assassin intended should be the case; but it was quickly remembered that the dead couple had had a child with them, and the closest search failed to find aught of this."

"That couple were your father and mother. That child was yourself. The assassin was the man whom you have learned to love and respect and term father—Rebel George!"

"An ingenious story, but all the same—a lie!"

"I expected you to, say as much, if not exactly in such polite phraseology," laughed Foxy Branscombe, showing his wolfish teeth. "I do not ask you to believe my assertion without ample proof; and rest assured that proof will be forthcoming when Rebel George puts in an appearance."

"Now for my particular interest in this case. Though a very rich man, I have no serious objections to becoming still more wealthy. I discovered this little romance. I found out that you were the rightful heiress to enormous wealth, though Rebel George had raised you in blissful ignorance of that fact, and you live a hand-to-mouth life. I hunted you out. I fell in love with your charming face and adorable person, even more utterly than I had with your fortune. I resolved to woo and win you, though the odds seemed terribly against one so heavily handicapped by age and plainness of face. Still, I did not despair, and as you see, there was reason in my madness."

"I have won your pledge—"

"Do not forget that it is conditional," sharply.

"I forget nothing. Those conditions will be fully complied with, never fear. Yet, even should I fail in that respect, I would still succeed in making you my wife. I would force you to love me, though your hatred and contempt were doubly strong. You might struggle, but you could not avoid yielding in the end. Your will is not powerful enough to resist mine, for any length of time."

"You smile," he added, swiftly, leaning forward, as her lip curled with scorn. "Do you defy me? Do you doubt my power?"

"Everything but your sublime impudence and wickedness!"

"You are bold," with his green eyes glowing.

"You forget that you are wholly at my mercy, and—"

Up rose the revolver, and swift flashed the warning:

"Stir a step and I fire!"

A lightning-swift motion, and the weapon was knocked out of her benumbed hand, exploding as it fell to the floor. Then, with a wolfish snarl of mingled passion and triumph, Dirigo Branscombe caught her slender form in his arms, clasping it to his breast with mad ardor, growling and mumbling as he covered her pale lips with his own.

In vain she struggled to escape him, uttering one wild, gasping cry for help ere those sinewy arms crushed her to helplessness, those hot, loathsome lips shut off all further utterance.

CHAPTER V.

"TALK OF THE EVIL ONE—"

As Rebel George uttered the words with which the second chapter of this story closes, he cast one swift glance into the face of the man to whom they were addressed, then the long lashes shaded his glittering eyes, dimming the reddish glow that had sprung into them at the first sound of the stranger's voice. His white teeth closed almost fiercely upon his red lip as he awaited an answer, and when it came, the pent-up breath exhaled in a quick pant.

"Matney, thank this—ah—this gentleman for his kind offer, and pay him whatever he asks for the use of his vehicle—it is a vehicle of some sort, I presume."

"Something of that sort, yes," drawled Rebel George, his jetty eyes glancing up for a moment, though it would hardly recognize itself under that lofty title. An old style hearse, rather dilapidated, I fear, if the truth must be told, but with stick-together enough in its joints and springs to convey us to Durango. I reckon. At any rate, the prospect is a trifle more cheerful than counting ties."

"I am exceedingly anxious to reach Durango, with the least possible delay, but at the

same time, a hearse is not exactly the thing for a lady to—ah—Matney!"

"If I may be permitted, Mr. Adair," hastily uttered the gentleman in spectacles, as the other turned stiffly, starchily, yet none the less helplessly toward him for aid. "Would it not be better for Miss Adair to remain here with the rest of the passengers, until a train can come from Durango?"

"A very proper suggestion, no doubt, but one to which Miss Adair very decidedly objects," hastily interposed a clear, musical voice, coming from the close-veiled figure leaning upon the arm of the tall gentleman. "As for the conveyance, if I mistake not," turning toward Rebel George and lifting her veil with a daintily-gloved hand, "it is a hearse for the living, not the dead. Am I right?"

"True as a die, ma'am," he bowed, mechanically smoothing his long, straight hair, for his hat had been lost in that mad race for life down the track ahead of the train-wreckers. "We're rough cut—creatures out in these wilds, and have made a language of our own. By hearse, I meant an ancient, superannuated mail coach, which I am almost positive is attainable. If you will permit me, I will be only too happy—"

"Name your price, sir, and I will double it," brusquely uttered Adair; when the swift pressure of his daughter's hand on his arm cut him short, as she hastily said:

"Father, you forget. This gentleman is the one who saved our lives at the risk of his own by signaling the train. I am right, am I not?" she added softly, extending her hand to Rebel George, who visibly hesitated before clasping it between his own.

The red light of the signal-lantern fell full upon her unveiled face, distinctly revealing its various charms.

A blonde of the purest type, Maura Adair might easily have borne away the palm from a world's congress of beauties.

Her features were clear-cut and classical in their outlines, yet redolent of youthful health, cheerful spirit and frank generosity—rare qualities to be combined with such beauty, wealth and aristocratic lineage.

Her hair was like the finest of spun gold; her eyes, blue as the sky of summer, were large and lustrous; her lips red and arched; her teeth small and pearly; her tall form full, superbly rounded, perfectly developed, might have formed a model for an enthusiastic sculptor's dream of the Anadyomene of Apelles.

Intently, almost sternly, Rebel George gazed into the face before him, the red glow deepening in his dark eyes, his lips closing tightly across his white teeth, his countenance growing ashen pale. Thus for a few moments, then he dropped the gloved hand with a short, hard laugh, as he said:

"That I kicked up this bit of a row, yes. Whether I saved your lives or not is another question, which is not so readily answered. If I have done anything to deserve your thanks, you can best reward me by forgetting the whole affair."

"That is not so easily done," with a sweet smile, no ways rebuffed by his abrupt, almost surly manner of speech.

"Then by not mentioning it again—that, at least, you can promise," he said, turning abruptly toward her father.

"If you choose to accept my offer as freely as it is made, well and good; but if accepted, it must be with the understanding that there is to be no offer of payment other than the pleasure of your company during a long and cheerless ride. Will you agree to my conditions?"

The gentleman addressed thus bluntly stared through his gold-mounted eye-glasses, then turned helplessly toward Matney.

"With pleasure, sir, and many thanks, since you will accept of no more substantial remuneration," that worthy bowed.

"You form one of the party, then?"

"I am Mr. Adair's secretary," was the quick response.

"Of course he accompanies us. I can do nothing in this heathenish country without Matney," added his employer.

Again those keen black eyes were busily at work, looking more Indian-like than usual, though the friendly shadows and the long lashes hid the lurid light which filled their depths from the notice of those whom he scanned so closely.

Albert Matney has already been described with sufficient detail for the present, but his employer merits a more than passing glance, considering the part he has to play in this record of actual life.

Tall, thin almost to gauntness; a small head, broad above the ears, tapering down to the chin; light blue eyes, now keen and eager, anon dull and sleepy; a short, thin nose, curved like the beak of an eagle; thin, compressed lips and pointed, protruding chin; long neck, narrow, sloping shoulders; figure stiffly erect; small, white hands and slender feet.

His hair was cut short, of a snowy whiteness, as also were the tiny patches of whisker which came down on each cheek to the tip of his ears.

He was plainly but neatly dressed in a business suit of dark-gray stuff, and wore no visible

jewelry or ornaments, save a solitaire diamond pin in his cravat.

Such was Horatio Adair in outward appearance. What his character and more prominent traits, the sequel will show.

At a single glance Rebel George made these observations, and there was no perceptible hesitation in his response:

"There will be room for him, also; but I fear that the remainder of your party will have to wait for the train."

"There is no remainder. We three are all. And the coach?"

"On that point our arrangement may fall to pieces, though I sincerely hope not," said Rebel George, with a short laugh. "I omitted to state that we will have to walk some five miles before you can avail yourselves of even this forlorn hope. Unless, indeed, you prefer to remain here until I can walk there and drive back with the hearse."

"I'm not sure that I fully comprehend," hesitated Adair.

"Thanks to my stupidity," softly laughed Rebel George. "I'm a better hand at flipping the pasteboards, then at speechifying. Bunch the papers, and we'll try a new deal."

"We are now at Florida Station. Five miles due north of this place, lies Florida post-office. A friend of mine hangs out there, and no longer ago than yesterday, I saw an old mail coach standing at his stable, discarded as too old for further service. There's plenty of go in it, however, for our purpose, as the roads are not bad; and the old man can fit us up a sort of shake-bag team, that'll take us into Durango long before the sun kicks off its nightcap for a fresh day's work."

Horatio Adair glanced helplessly into the face of Albert Matney, while Maura smothered a smile that was very nearly audible. Truly, their new-found acquaintance was something beyond the ordinary; a creature of sharp and sudden changes and contrasts—one moment the polished, courtly gentleman, the next, a good representative of that wild, half-civilized region with his brusqueness and quaint vernacular.

"It is very important that Mr. Adair should reach Durango with the slightest possible delay," uttered the soft, quiet tones of Albert Matney. "If you think it would be perfectly safe, and the course to be followed is in fair condition for pedestrians, there would be a saving of time if we were to bear you company at once."

"Safe enough, I reckon, unless you should stumble across some of Elephant Tom's gang," laughed Rebel George. "And even then, with two good men to back me, and a fair lady looking on to behold and applaud our deeds of valor, we three should be able to brush aside a pretty good sized army—eh?"

"If you think—Maura, child, you had best remain here with Matney as an escort, until I can send a guard from town."

"Indeed, no!" positively replied his daughter. "I shall enjoy the walk, and only wish it were twice as far. As for danger, I am sure our kind friend, Mr.—"

"Rebel George, ma'am, the sports call me; partly because they had run out of better nicknames, and partly because I was one of the Graybacks found in the last ditch, when our little unpleasantness was squelched, a few years back, not to mention my natural cussedness in declining to consider myself as one among the reconstructed."

Impulsively Maura caught his hands and pressed them between her own, with a little laugh, as she uttered:

"We ought to become the best of friends, then, for, do you know, I am just as fiery an untamed rebel as yourself!"

"Begging your pardon, Miss Adair; but we are wasting time that may prove of incalculable importance," interposed Albert Matney.

Rebel George saw that a swift flush suffused her cheeks, and he fancied he could detect an echo of authority in the tones of the gentlemanly secretary, hardly authorized by the station he occupied; but he was not given much time for considering the matter, as Horatio Adair showed a feverish impatience to commence the journey.

The foregoing conversation had been overheard by others of the passengers, who seemed equally in haste to reach their journey's end, a number of whom now announced their intention of bearing them company; but Rebel George bluntly spoke:

"Just as you like, gentlemen. The roads are free to all, and if you are fond of a moonlight stroll, just for the pleasure of retracing your steps, I don't know any one to object. But you'd show wisdom in taking your bed and board with you, for it's precious little of either you'll find at Florida."

"If you can procure a conveyance there, why can't we?"

"Simply because you can't make a dozen out of one, and that one bears my pre-emption claim."

"I reckon that one would go to the highest bidder."

"My dear sir," with an indescribable drawl in his voice that stung almost as sharply as

would a slap in the face; "you appear woefully ignorant concerning our mining-laws. I have filed my claim to that hearse, in due form, as by law provided. The man or men who attempt to jump it, will strike mineral enough to last them to the end of their lives. You *sabe*?"

Though rudely figurative, this language was readily interpreted, and the quartette left the little station behind them without being followed.

Rebel George led the way at a brisk pace, and as the road, or trail, rather, was in tolerable condition, they made rapid progress, soon reaching the first stage in their journey.

Rebel George cut little time to waste in hunting up his friend and dragging out the superannuated stage, to which was quickly attached a pair of rough but spirited horses. A few hasty words between him and the owner, then the latter mounted the box, while Rebel George entered the body with his new-found acquaintance, saying lightly:

"I intended tooling the hearse myself, but my friend says he would have to make the trip to Durango in the morning anyway, and as he would have to foot it or else wait for the ark to come back, he'll hold the ribbons himself."

"I'm not objecting, either, for Jimmy is a rare good hand at slinging lead, when it comes to the pinch, and that quality may come in handy before the end of our little run."

"You surely do not anticipate danger?" hastily inquired Mr. Adair.

"Not exactly," was the cool response. "But I've noticed that those who are always in readiness to meet danger when it comes generally come out ahead of the game. Of course you gents are heeled?"

"If by that expression you mean armed, I never carry concealed weapons," stiffly responded Adair. "Mr. Matney is provided with firearms, I believe."

"Which, no doubt, he is an adept at handling," said Rebel George, with an ill-concealed sneer in his tones. "Let us hope that we will have a smooth passage and no snags in the channel; but since Elephant Tom began his toll-gathering in these parts a fellow can't most always sometimes tell!"

"You mean the wretch whose atrocious attempt at train-wrecking you so nobly foiled this evening?" asked Maura, with true womanly curiosity. "Do tell me more about him. Is he such a terrible ruffian? Who is he? What is he?"

"A gentleman who has a passion for conveyancing, hardly of the legal order," laughed Rebel George. "Emptying one pocket to fill another, you understand; and that other his own."

"Ever since Durango became Durango he has been working the roads, and after the first few attempts, where pilgrims were foolish or bold enough to question his right to collect toll, his challenge of 'Your gold-dust or your life!' has been universally understood to mean business, pure and simple."

"Let a man object to be bled in one way, he was pretty sure to bleed in another," still more disagreeable to those who cling to this world."

"Why don't the honest men organize and hunt him down, as though he were a mad dog?" indignantly cried Horatio Adair.

"What is every man's business, is no man's business," laughed Rebel George. "And then, who is to decide who are the honest men? Out here, it is every man for himself, and—Excuse the slip, Miss Adair. I should say, no one can swear that his most intimate friend is not one of the gang, or at least a sympathizer, whose first thought would be to warn his fellows of the brewing storm. The gang wear disguises and masks which no eye can penetrate, while they are at work. When their play is over, and they doff these coverings, who is to say they are not pure as the purest?"

"But he and his band were so completely repulsed by you, only such a short time ago, there surely can be no danger of his attacking us 'way off here?" uttered Maura.

"Not much danger, I admit. Still, it is possible," was the quiet response. "Who knows but what Elephant Tom himself was watching when we left the station? If so, he could hardly mistake our purpose. Then, if he felt so inclined, what would be easier than for him to take a short cut across lots, to lie in wait somewhere along the trail for our coming?"

"Truly, you are a Job's comforter, Mr. George!"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Adair," quickly. "I am not prophesying; simply stating the possibilities. If I really believed there was any danger of encountering Elephant Tom, be sure I would never have consented to your bearing us company on this trip."

"Thanks! But—you see I am a true woman in my curiosity—why Elephant Tom? Is he such a giant in size?"

"It is not so easy to say just what he is or is not, for there are nearly as many different descriptions of him going the rounds, as there are men whose pockets he has emptied. All unite in saying that he is huge in breadth, but while some say he is also a giant in height, as many

more declare that he is shorter than the ordinary run of mankind."

"One other peculiarity, however, seems pretty well agreed upon, and that is the tremendous size and odd shape of his nose, which more nearly resembles the stunted trunk of a baby elephant than the ordinary handle to the human countenance."

"I should really like to see him—at a safe distance and place, of course; say in prison," laughed Maura.

"I hardly think your curiosity will ever be gratified," gravely uttered Rebel George. "Elephant Tom, whatever else he may be, is hardly a man to suffer himself to be taken alive. But if he should chance to be, he would hardly live to cross the threshold of a prison."

"Do you mean he would commit suicide?"

"Doubtless he would prefer that to entering a jail, but such was not my meaning. If his enemies did not lynch him he would be killed by his friends."

"Because he was luckless enough to be taken?"

"To render it impossible for his tongue to utter a word of truth. You still hear people talk about honor among thieves, Miss Adair, but if ever I met saying had truth for its foundation, time would most thoroughly rot it away the props. Such a rogue and let him think that his only chance of getting out of lin lies in squealing and he'll sell his own father, to the hangman. And why not? Are there no dastardly traitors in the ranks of so-called honorable men? Ayl and the most treacherous, the most cruel and cowardly of all!"

Hotly, rising, bitterly came the words, and his hearers felt instinctively that Rebel George was speaking now out of the fullness of his own experience, and an oppressive restraint fell over them all.

It did not last long, however. Rebel George cast off the spell, and rattled on, volubly, uttering a curious *melange* of fact and fancy, now serious, now whimsical, until his hearers were thoroughly puzzled to say whether he was laughing at or with them.

Then he drifted into another vein, as the superannuated stage-coach rattled and creaked up and down, here and there, over the long trail which was dignified by the name of road.

Glib of speech, and with a rare command of the Western hyperbole and mining vernacular, Rebel George poured forth a flood of marvelous reminiscences in which he had played a more or less prominent part, all so artistically shaped that for the life of them his audience could not tell whether it was all gospel or simple gasconade.

"Of course Elephant Tom will soon learn who it was that interfered with his little game at Rio Florida," he added, in a graver tone, after a brief silence. "And equally as a matter of course, he'll go in to get even with me, unless I forestall him again. I reckon I'll have to take him into camp, and break up his gang, if only in self-defense."

"Halt! Hands up! Your gold-dust or your life!"

Harsh and menacing came the voice from ahead, and with a startled exclamation the driver jerked up his horses.

"I'll kill the first fool that tries to burn powder!" rumbled the same stern voice. "Cover the ark, boys, and riddle it with lead at the first crooked motion!"

"Elephant Tom, by all that's evil!" grated Rebel George. "May the devil fly away with the bloodhound! He's doubled on us, and got the drop, too!"

"Surely he will not harm us?" faltered Maura, her face showing ghastly pale in the moonlight as it came in through the open window. "He will spare our lives—"

"Trust to me. Drop down on the floor, and lie close!" hurriedly grated Rebel George, grasping her arm and forcing compliance almost before the maiden divined his intention. "Leave all to me and I'll give the devil a surprise-party!"

There was time for no more words. The coach was completely surrounded by masked and cowed figures, heavily armed, and through the window on the side where Rebel George sat, that harsh, threatening voice sounded again:

"Your gold-dust or your lives, my downy ones!"

"Neither the one nor the other for you, Elephant Tom!" snarled Rebel George, and as he uttered the defiant words, he thrust a cocked revolver through the window, until its muzzle fairly struck against the broad bosom of the road-agent and pulled the trigger.

A flash—a report—and the outlaw staggered back, uttering a hoarse howl like that of a wounded wild beast.

From the opposite side of the coach came several swift reports, and turning swiftly, Rebel George saw Albert Matney firing, and the outlaws falling before his aim.

Then he was grasped from behind in a vise-like grip.

"Now I've got you, Rebel George—got you foul!"

CHAPTER VI.

TOMPOLEON TARBOX, FROM PURGATOIRE.

"WHOO-oop! Come out o' that, ye unconceivable, superfluous, roaring devil of a gal-biter! You fresty-topped scrub! You incarniverous sucker o' honey from she-angels' lips! Ef I didn't hold condensation scruples ag'in stompin' a polecat to 'tarnal squashamentation under my hoofs, I'd spread ye out over this yer floor so thin that ye'd sarve fer a lookin'-glass to shave into—ef ye wasn't made out o' sech tormentified dirty pulp I jest more'n would!"

As the first syllable smote upon his ears, Dirigo Branscombe felt his right arm almost paralyzed, as a heavy hand struck and closed upon it, while another steel-like member gripped his neck from behind with a deadly force that seemed beyond the scope of merely human powers.

For one instant he was absolutely powerless to move limb or muscle in self-defense. His first thought was that Rebel George Bretto had returned and taken him by surprise; but then the sound of that indignant voice grew clearer, and failing to recognize it as that of any one whom he knew, the speculator threw off the temporary numbness which had fettered his limbs, and with a gasping, snarling snarl of fury, fought desperately to free himself, to snatch a weapon from its hiding place in his bosom.

As well might a smoke column offer battle to the funnel of a cyclone.

In the hands of his assailant, Dirigo Branscombe was but little more than a plaything. The hand that sought his throat was knocked aside, wrenched and benumbed. That terrible grip on his neck grew tighter and tighter, and as the form of the half-senseless girl slipped from his grasp, he was lifted clear of the floor, and held at arm's length, then shaken so violently that his teeth clattered together, and it seemed as though his dangling limbs would be jerked from their sockets.

"Snash yer teeth an' bat yer eyes, ye twistification jumpin' jack!" jeeringly cried the voice of his assailant, emphasizing each sentence by a fresh exercise of tremendous muscles. "Think up an' say over all the good words ye larned in the airy days o' yer youth, fer I'm gwine to shake all the crooks an' quirks an' pizen cussedness out o' ye, an' ef that leaves anythin' more'n a empty shell inside your dry-goods, then I don't know a bumble-bee from a bull's foot!"

Another tremendous shake, a swift whirl that turned the feet of the speculator uppermost and brought him to the floor head first with stunning force, then the stranger strode to where Naomi Bretto half reclined upon the floor, bending over her with a touch and voice that seemed gentleness itself.

"Look up, little lady, an' tell the ole man he didn't hurt ye none. Lord love ye fer a hummin' bird o' beauty an' heart's delight! Brace up, little posy-bright, an' be a man—leastwise, a woman I meanter say. Thar, honey-eyes; set you down an' ketch your breath, while I tend to that indignant iniquiter yender. Laws-ee-osey! ef the dainty little sugar-lump ain't a-leakin' at the two eyes o' her! Now don't ee—don't ee do it, honey-bird! It's all over now, an' that dad-sampled exfunctionationer ain't wuth one teenty drap o' briny from them sweet peep-holes to heaven—no he ain't!"

Strange contrast between the man and his words and actions; the first so rough and uncouth, the others so soft, so tender and soothing, as he knelt at her feet, wiping away the hysterical tears that chased each other down her cheeks.

Tall and muscular in build, erect in carriage, swift and lithe in his movements as a panther, large-boned and double-jointed; gaunt, almost to emaciation; an Indian-like face, framed in a dense tangle of iron-gray hair, through which but little more than a pair of intensely bright gray eyes and hawk nose were distinguishable; a battered hat of soft felt, with extremely wide brim; a flannel shirt, that had once been navy-blue; leather-reinforced overalls of brown canvas, the lower extremities lost to view in the yawning tops of horse-hide boots; a broad leather belt, supporting a knife and brace of pistols.

Such was the outward appearance of the man who had so opportunely made his entrance upon the scene at the Bretto cabin.

Naomi realized his kindness, rude and uncouth though the guise it assumed, but her strength of both mind and body had been severely overtasked, and now the reaction had come. She tried to master her agitation, to choke down her sobs, but in vain. With the quivering body of her base assailant lying before her eyes as a reminder of all that he had forced her to undergo, that was impossible.

The keen-eyed stranger realized this, and as Dirigo Branscombe uttered a gasping snarl and strove to arise, he turned from her and fastened upon him, lifting him to his feet with a jerk that almost shook him out of his boots.

Turning him face about, so that he could gaze direct into the eyes, no longer green, but deeply bloodshot, one hand gripping his throat in such a manner as to throw the chin back and force

him to meet that indignant gaze, the miner addressed him sharply, decisively, emphasizing his words by the waving of a forefinger:

"It'd sarve ye no more'n right ef I was to jest nat'ally snatch ye bald-headed, strip off yer hide an' turn ye 't'other side out'ards to hang up fer a scarecrow an' warnin' to all other flagrant buzzards—but I never did like to tackle a polecat job, when I could git out o' it, an' I'll let ye slide this time, with a warnin' never to show your ugly top-knot in these diggin's ag'in under penalty. Yit I kin feel somethin' a-crawlin' under my skin that calls me a blamed fool fer not squelchin' of ye—No ye don't!"

Dirigo Branscombe snatched a pistol from his breast-pocket, but before he could use it, that free hand wrested it from his grasp and tossed it across the room upon the bed. Then, swift as thought, the sidewy hand struck him on the cheek with a sound as of a pistol-crack, so heavily that he would have been knocked headlong only for a duplicate blow which left the prints of every finger on his other cheek.

A howl of painful rage burst from his lips, but his strength was gone, his eyes were blinded, and nothing but the swift renewed grip upon his throat kept him from falling.

"Nother trick or two like that, an' thar won't be enough o' ye left fer me to lecter—so go easy, ye 'tarnal critter."

"I don't know your name or nation, rank or station—which is one-hoss poetry—nur I don't give a continental darn fer one, two, both or neither on 'em. Mebbe you're King Pharaoh, or the Great Mogul hisself. Mebbe you're high-muck-a-muck enough fer to hev a pore, innocent cuss like me hung, drawn an' quartered into two-bit pieces, fer botherin' of ye in yer high-toned love-makin'. Mebbe you be—but all the same, you jus' listen to your pap while he gives it to ye straight."

"When I unloosen my meat-pinchers, you want to skin out o' this, jest as sudden as the law 'lows ye. You don't want to stop fer no back talk, nur yit to stan' onto your dig', or you'll be ready to take your 'davy in the other world that a he-old mount'in tumbled on top o' ye, right then an' thar."

"Ef anybody takes intrust enough into sech a pizen ole scab as you, to ax what fer you went monkeyin' 'round a thrashin' merchine, an' whose patent she was, jest tell 'em Tom-poleon Tarbox, from Purgatoire river an' town, sot down onto ye, heavy."

"Now, down onto yer marrer-bones afore this dainty little sugar lump o' perpetual delight—so!" forcing the speculator to his knees before the chair occupied by Naomi Bretto.

"Open yer pill-box, an' 'peat after your pap, thusly:

"Lady, yer at your footstool lays a pizen hunk o' bad medicine, which it'd teetotally ruin your oldest moccasins fer to wipe yer feet onto. Clean down from my toe-nails comes the humble 'fession that I've played the dirty whelp an' cowardly cur this day. I don't ax your pardin, fer I ain't worthy to 'ceive it, an' I hain't got man enough into me to 'preciate it, anyway. I jest eat dirt, an' hope you'll condescend to live in the world I've disgraced, long enough fer me to git out of it, by blowin' my head wide open with a smell at my pictur' in the fust lookin'-glass I kin stumle across—amen!"

Stunned, bewildered, scarce knowing what he was saying or doing, Dirigo Branscombe mumbled over the first few words, but then, as he caught sight of a faint smile lighting up the face of the maiden whom he had so shamefully insulted, his lips closed with an angry, defiant snarl, and he said no more.

But the worthy Tarbox seemed satisfied with his compliance thus far, and as he uttered the last word with a sonorous emphasis, he dragged the speculator to the door, lifted him to his feet, steadied him thus for a moment, then stepped swiftly back and gave his right foot full swing.

With the force of a catapult, the horsehide boot struck Dirigo Branscombe directly beneath the coat-tails, lifting him from his feet and sending him flying across the threshold.

"Now, peel out, you gully-whompin' iniquiter, or you'll hear me a-comin', head up an' tail over the dasher, eyes full o' blood, an' teeth a-snashin'—that's me, Tom-poleon Tarbox, fresh from the classic precincts o' Purgatoire!"

Dirigo Branscombe struck the ground in much the same attitude as a running athlete alights after taking a running wide leap, and thus far his involuntary flight was graceful enough, but as his feet touched terra firma they yielded beneath him, his body turned over, his head for a moment became a pivot, and end over end he turned, like some ambitious schoolboy trying to emulate a knock-about clown.

An ordinary man would have been stunned, if not killed, by all that he had undergone during those last few minutes, but the mining speculator was made of tough material. Bruised, bleeding, breathless, he painfully staggered to his feet while Tom-poleon Tarbox was delivering his parting advice, brushing the mingled dirt and blood from his eyes. Guided more by the sound, than the sight, he turned toward the door of the cabin, and when the speaker ceased,

his clinched fist was shaken in that direction, his husky, gasping voice panted out the words:

"Kill me, or I'll kill you! You took me foul, from behind. You've blinded me so that I cannot see your face, but I've got your voice photographed on my brain and my heart—"

"Which I reckon it's the first honest article as ever bothered any one afore," interjected Tom-poleon, jeeringly.

"By that I'll know you when we meet—and meet we will! The world ain't wide enough to hold us both. As for her—"

"You stop right whar you be!" sternly cried Tarbox, his voice menacing, each word passing his lips with the sharpness of a pistol-crack. "I don't mind how you chaw onto my name an' natur', but ef you go to slobber over hers, I'll lend ye one right whar ye live. An when I hit a critter o' your size an' substance, all the folks what live in the next county'll take thar 'davy that thar's been a shower o' blood an' turribly spiled chicken-feed immejitly after—betcher sweet life!"

An inarticulate snarl was the only answer, and then Dirigo Branscombe turned away and staggered along the trail over which he had so recently come with vastly different sensations—then, the whole world his oyster, which he flattered himself he could open at his own sweet will, now—

Tom-poleon Tarbox watched him until he was hidden by passing below the plateau on which the little cabin stood, then turned toward the maiden, a pleasant smile upon his lips.

The smile vanished, a sharp cry of consternation parted his heavily bearded lips, for Naomi Bretto lay back in her chair, her eyes closed, her face as pale as that of the corpse she so closely resembled—for the strain had proved too severe, and she swooned without a gasp or moan of warning.

Growling, muttering to himself, Tom-poleon Tarbox sprinkled water over her face, clapped and rubbed her hands, never ceasing in his endeavors until perfect success rewarded his efforts, and the dark eyes slowly unclosed, to gaze wonderingly upon the strange face which hovered over her, into the gray eyes whose wonted brilliancy was now strangely dimmed and misty.

"Thank the good Lord! you got back ag'in, posy-bright!" he spluttered, his voice a curious commingling of joy and commiseration. "When I tarned away from that cantankerous, preambulatin' pizen-plant, an' see you thar so still an' quiet, like a lump o' ice-cream, my ole heart jumped clean up inter my throat an' went to tartin' flip-flops quicker'n scat! Fer I couldn't think nothin' else but what you'd got sick an' 'gusted with this airth an' all the outlandish clatters onto it, an' jest unfolded your wings an' flew clean back to the heaven you come from—ef I didn't, I'd chaw my ole hat!"

Quaint and uncouth the greeting, but perhaps its effect was all the more certain on that account, and who shall say that the worthy Tarbox was not shrewd enough to anticipate this?

Be that as it may, Naomi smiled faintly, her memory restored without a break, and she glanced hurriedly around the room as though in quest of something.

"Ef it's that two-legged kit o' bad medicine you're lookin' fer, honey," quickly interpreted Tarbox, "he won't do ye no more trouble. He's clean gone—"

"Not escaped?" swiftly cried Naomi, leaping to her feet. "You have not let him get away!"

"He's pulled out, that's sartin, sugar-lump," replied Tarbox, rubbing his nose dubiously, as he gazed wistfully into the fair face before him. "I didn't reckon you'd want to see him ag'in, after his pizen doin's, an' so I jest sot my private seal onto him, an' told him to vamish afore the butt-end of a full-grown cyclone snatched him bald-headed. Which he did it, too, a-chawin' soap an' a-scratchin' at the atmospheric like he had the wustest sort o' hyderphobic jimjams!"

"I meant to have kept him here until my father returned to call him to account for the vile calumnies he uttered."

"It ain't too late to fetch him back, ef yo think best, honey-bright," slowly uttered Tarbox. "Jest say the word, an' I'll do it or break my neck a-tryin'. But ef you'd lis'en to the 'vice of a rough ole coot who wishes you well, you won't say that word jest yit. You'll let him crawl back inter his hole, an' stay thar as long's he will. You'll take a clean rag an' wipe away all he writ onto your mind an' heart, an' hev it bright an' clean afore your father comes home."

"Let his foul lies and insults go without punishment?" flashed Naomi, her dark eyes glowing. "If you knew father, if you knew me, and had heard what he said, you would never give me such advice as that!"

"Ef a body could look down into the mud-hole which he calls his heart, I reckon they'd see he didn't go clean shet o' punishment," chuckled Tom-poleon. "Onto his thrapple he kerries the grip o' my fingers. Onto his two cheeks is writ the size o' my han's. An' when he fergits the size an' weight o' my shoe-maker, it'll be a heap colder day than this. No, my honey-sweet pritty-by-night, lookin' at it calmly

an' with liberation, I don't honestly reckon a critter'd be jestified in sayin' that Mister Man got clean shet o' punishment."

Calmed despite herself by his deliberation, Naomi sunk back into her chair, the hot, angry flush fading from her cheek. But though her voice was more even, it was none the less stern and decided as she spoke again:

"Let him go for now; but the reckoning shall come, true as there is a heaven above us this day! He shall account for his foul calumnies, and to the man whom he has so bitterly slandered while absent. That I swear, by all men hold holy!"

"Which I ain't takin' it onto myself to say he don't deserve, starry-eyes," said Tompoleon, softly. "I didn't git to hear much that he said, but I'm willin' to take your word fer it that it was all that's mean an' 'spiseable; the ugly mug o' him is wuth a hunderd oaths to that effect. But at the same time, ef it wouldn't be presumin' too much onto good natur' to ax you to let me whisper a few words—"

Impulsive Naomi rose from her seat and grasped his big hand in hers, raising it swiftly to her lips and pressing a kiss upon it before Tarbox could divine her motive.

"You have nobly earned the right, my friend, and I would be an ungrateful wretch did I not listen with respect to all that you may choose to utter," she murmured earnestly.

Flushing hotly, Tompoleon hastily withdrew his hand; then, as if fearful he had given offense by his brusqueness, he laid it softly upon her head with a caressing touch, saying, in a voice that was husky and forced:

"Bless your sweet heart, little essence o' delight, you do the ole man so almighty proud, he'll hev to 'vest into a new suit o' rijimentals, fer them words an' that tetch o' them velvet rose leaves swell him up so big that he'll never be able fer ter shrink back ag'in to his 'riginal size—no he won't, honey!"

"Thar—set down ag'in, dewdrop in the desert; set down, an' let the ole man talk a bit. He's a powerful windy old coot, when he once gits a-goin', but 'mong all the chaff that streams out o' his fan-mill, thar may be a grain or two o' clean wheat wuth markin' down an' savin'."

Drawing a chair partially between her and the door, so that he could watch both outside and in, without exertion, the old fellow spoke rapidly, and earnestly:

"It's easy to be see'd that you don't memorize the ole man, posy-bright, but fer all that, he was one o' your warmest fri'nds an' 'mirers, years ago, afore either on us ever strayed into this onchristianly region, or—"

"You are sure?" cried Naomi, bending forward and gazing intently into his face, striving to read there some familiar line, by the waning light of the declining sun. "My memory is very tenacious, and I rarely forget a face I have once seen, or voice when once heard; but try as I may, I fail to recall either voice or features, now."

A pleasant smile wreathed the face of the veteran as he listened, and a soft laugh came from his bearded lips.

"Little shame to you, honey-drop. No, no; I ain't a-blamin' of ye fer not recomemberin' the ole man. The wonder would be ef you *did*, sence it's bin all o' seventeen year ago that you last looked up into this homely phiz, ontel jest now. You wasn't much more'n two year ole, then; but all the same, I knowed my baby sweetheart the dential minnit I clapped my two eyes onto ye—yes I *did*, little pink o' perfection: the ole man knowed ye so quick that it made his head swim!"

"When I was a baby? And you knew my father—my mother?" Naomi asked with breathless eagerness, her dark eyes glowing.

"All two, both on 'em, cherry-ripe; an' I loved him like he was my own kin, so I did. Oh, we was thicker 'n six in a bed an' three in the middle, your pap an' me was, an'—"

"My mother—what of her? Oh, you say you are my friend—that you knew and loved them, my parents! Tell me of her—of my mother! Where is she? What happened to her? What was she like? Only think—I never knew her—never even saw a picture of her dear face! Tell me of her, please!" pleaded Naomi, clasping both hands upon his arm as she leaned forward and gazed imploringly, tearfully, eagerly into his face.

"Then Rebel George—I should say, your father—he never tole ye nothin'? Yit you axed him, didn't ye, pritty?"

"Time and time again, only to have his face darken as he turned away, ever in silence. But you can tell me, and—"

"Thar, honey-plum," gently interposed Tompoleon, tapping her richly-flushed cheek with the tip of one gaunt finger. "Take it ca'm an' easy, pet; but at the same time jest look at the matter with your two eyes wide open."

"I don't advertise to be a saint, nur yit a 'fallible' zample to my feller-beings; not any—quite contrary-wise. I'm a rough, ign'ant ole coot as you'll find in a summer day's hunt by telegraph. But somehow it looks as though I'd be playin' it rather low down onto Rebel George ef I was to talk about things which he won't, to ye; now don't it, honey-bright?"

Naomi sighed but made no response, though her eager face clouded and grew sad again.

Tompoleon averted his gaze and spoke hurriedly, like one who fears to give another opening for a forbidden subject.

"To come back to that p'izen prevaricationer, Foxy Branscombe. He didn't git to re-cognize me, but I know him better 'n a book. He's deady p'izen clean through. Mighty bad medicine. Yit he's a monstrous big duck in the puddle, down yender, an' the man what he gits a hefty grudge ag'inst ain't a goin to sleep onto a bed of rose-leaves—no, he *ain't*, honey!"

"I don't know what he tole ye 'bout your pap; nothin' good or true, I'll bet a cookie. But you won't be doin' neither on 'em any good by 'peatin' of it to George. I know him of old. I know he'd march right down to town an' ax fer a settlement—an' git it, too, no matter what the odds was ag'in him. It'd be sartin death to Foxy, but how much better would your pap come off, say he rubbed out the insult without gittin' a scratch to show for Foxy's claws!"

"He wouldn't live to see another sun—that's sartin. Mebbe you do, or mebbe ye don't, know that your pap hes got more enemies then fri'nds in Durango; but it's the scan'alous truth, fer all that. Let him give them sech a han'le fer liftin' the lynch-yell ag'inst him, an' up it'll go quicker'n scat!"

"Promise that you'll keep still afore him, an' I'll make a 'greement with you. I'll pledge you the word of a honest ole coot, that you'll never see any more trouble from Foxy Branscombe, from this hour on."

"You must not run into danger on my account," said Naomi, coldly, clearly not yet reconciled to his refusal to impart the knowledge she so passionately desired. "Where I am unable to defend myself, I can rely on the arm of my father."

"Which is a round-the-barn way o' sayin' you won't promise what I ax," and there was a trace of regret in the old man's voice. "Well, mebbe I axed too much fer one who must be like a clean stranger to ye. I fergot that you wasn't as old as me, when we knowed each other; but let it go."

"One thing more I will ax. When your pap comes back, tell him that a ole fri'nd says this: The air in these parts is growin' monstrous on-healthy, an' it's a turrible good kentry fer to absquatulate from, without stoppin' too long fer leave-takin' an' partin' words. Tell him that thar is a clean round-up in the air, which'll sweep things wuss then a new broom. Ef that ain't cl'ar enough fer him to compretan', jes' add this: The old oath o' Morgan's raid holds good. Ef the man who j'ined him in that swear, is obleeged to hit, he'll do the strikin' with a pa'r o' the softest gloves he kin find."

"What do you mean?" demanded Naomi, bewildered by his strange speech, as he suddenly rose from his chair.

"Jes' tell your pap what I said, an' he'll know. Now, my dew-drop o' delight—fer old time's sake!"

Catching her face in his hands, Tompoleon Tarbox stooped and pressed his lips to hers, then wheeled and left the cabin before she could utter a word or cry.

CHAPTER VII.

AN INDORSEMENT WANTED.

In anything but an enviable state of either mind or body, Dirigo Branscombe staggered down the steep, winding trail which led to the second plateau, or the one midway between the Bretto cabin and the level on which was built the town of Durango.

From top to toe his bruises were beginning to make themselves felt, with many a tweak and tinge, in all the stages between a dull, throbbing ache and the swift pang which accompanies the sudden thrusting of a needle into the flesh.

But these pains only drew an ugly curse from his lips now and then as he staggered on toward town; they were as a flea-bite to the torture he was enduring mentally.

Time and again his hasty and unsteady footsteps slackened as his fingers clutched at the secret receptacles where he usually carried his weapons, only to find as frequently that they were gone; the pistol torn from his blind grasp by the giant who had handled him so easily, thanks to the completeness of the surprise; the knife lost during that mad struggle or else in the gymnastical flight which followed that tremendous dose of horsehide. As often would he resume his hasty flight, broken sentences, liberally interspersed with fierce curses, hissing betwixt his grating, gnashing teeth.

"I'll get even with him—with him and with her—the hottest blasts of hell scorch and shrivel them both from now to the end of eternity! I'll kill him—I'll tear his heart out and make him eat it, bit by bit, even as he dies! I'll truss him up and poison his limbs so that they'll slough off, little by little, one after the other, and I'll fight back the coming of death, I'll feed him on rare and nourishing dainties to renew his strength, so that he can suffer fresh tortures as I devise them! I'll—"

His frightful rage choked him and shut off

his further speech for the moment. He hurried on with redoubled speed, for he forgot his bodily injuries in his demoniac lust for revenge. With the passage of each moment, his whirling, muddled brain was growing more and more clear, and already a scheme of vengeance against the man who had so completely shamed and worsted him was shaping itself in his mind.

Apparently Satan was not yet tired of standing his friend and ally, for scarcely had he gained the edge of the plateau nearest Durango on that side, than Dirigo Branscombe caught sight of a man climbing lazily up the rocks. At the same instant they saw each other, and the recognition which followed was mutual.

"Good land o' liberty, boss!" exclaimed the man below, his voice full of wondering curiosity as he paused abruptly and stared up into the bruised and battered face of the great speculator. "You look as though the ground had jumped up an' lent ye a be-old stem-winder all over the mug! Sure *ly*, you hain't bin mauled by a mount'n lion?"

At the sight of that evil face, the hot, unreasoning fury toned down, and seemed to turn to ice; yet an ice that was so fully impregnated with poison as to be even more deadly. A hard smile distorted the bruised lips, and swelled the blood-veins in the discolored eyes, rendering the face of the speculator so hideous that the fellow below abruptly ceased speaking, and shrunk back, one hand mechanically dropping upon a pistol-butt.

A short, harsh laugh hissed through the yellow teeth, and as Dirigo Branscombe began the descent of the rocks, he said:

"You've nothing to fear at my hands, Michigan Slim. No matter what has befallen me, it will prove a lucky land-fall for you, if you haven't lost your nerve with the bad whisky of that hell-hole down yonder."

"Them as questions my narves, want to order a wooden overcoat and speak fer thar funeral sarmint aforehan', boss!" uttered the fellow, though his sickly-pale countenance and his shrinking away, flatly belied the boastful speech.

However narrow his escape on other scores, Michigan Slim would never be in danger of being hung for his beauty of face or form. Over six feet in height, had he been forced to stand fully erect, he stooped so that his face was but a trifle above the level of that of Dirigo Branscombe, as they stood confronting each other. Not an ounce of superfluous flesh could have been found upon his entire person, and it seemed as though his tightly-drawn skin, blotched and freckled, was all that covered the bony frame; but those who should know best, said that the gangling ruffian carried muscle enough to make him an ugly customer for the best of athletes to handle.

His forehead was very narrow and, like his long chin, receded rapidly. His nose was enormously long and wondrously thin, curving like the beak of a vulture. A thin-lipped, straight mouth extended back almost to his huge, outstanding ears, the latter left in full relief by the jail-bird cut of his mouse-colored hair. And, as though nature took a malicious delight in her caricature of the human race, his hatchet-face was wholly innocent of hair.

"You're the man of all others I most wished to see, Michigan," huskily muttered Branscombe, changing his position so as to fully command the trail over which he had just passed. "You're never so flush but what you're willing to take the chances for a stake; ain't I right in that?"

"Ef the chainces ain't too durned hefty, I reckon you be," slowly returned Michigan Slim, with a dubious grin and a cautious light coming into his whitish eyes.

"I pay in proportion to the work to be done," impatiently. "If you're not satisfied with the scale, all you've got to do is to decline further negotiations."

"That's white, an' the pure quill. Spit'er out, boss!"

"You'll take hold of the job and put it through?"

"Long's the dust outweighs the resk—betcher sweet life ole Michigan is right thar, every time. Spit'er out!"

Dirigo Branscombe took a blank check-book from an inner pocket, and with a stylographic pen hastily wrote a few words and appended his signature, tearing out the form and holding it up before the wondering eyes of the ruffian.

It was a sight draft, promising to pay "John Doe" one thousand dollars, on presentation of the paper at the office of the signer.

Michigan Slim scratched the rear of his skull, while a look of dubiety filled his piggy eyes as he glanced from the writing into the face of the speculator, then back again.

"It talks of a powerful sight o' money, boss, but that John Doe part o' it is what gits me! Who is he, an' what's it all got to do with this chicken?—that's the point!"

"Did you never travel under another name than the one your parents gave you in the cradle, Michigan?" asked Branscombe, with a grating laugh. "If not, are you too old to learn? Couldn't you imagine yourself John Doe for a few hours, when through doing so you

knew you could offer a note like this for cash payment, with a certainty of no questions asked!"

"Reckon I mought, ef it wasn't nothin' hard-er'n that."

"Of course you have to earn the right to use the name before you can reap the reward. Listen, and I'll explain."

"There's a man up yonder at Rebel George's cabin. His name is John Doe. I owe him just one thousand dollars, and I fill up this note as payment. I forgot to give it to him before we parted, and I don't care about turning back just now. I will give it to you instead. You take it to him with my compliments, and say that the gold is waiting at my office. Though I don't know much about the gentleman, I am pretty confident that you will find him extremely cashful—so much so that he will probably beg you to collect the amount for him, and hold it in trust until he calls for it. You are naturally accommodating. You know where I hang out, and would just as soon do him a favor as not. He expresses his gratitude. You take the note and bring it to me. I ask your name. You say John Doe. My eyesight is very poor after sunset, and as the note is genuine I pay it down on the nail."

Swiftly the speculator spoke, marking each sentence by a little tap of the finger on the shoulder of the ruffian, who listened to him with steadily growing wonder and bewilderment, clearly beginning to doubt the perfect sanity of the man.

"You comprehend? It's all clear?" added Branscombe.

"Ef I do I'm a p'izen liar!" exploded Michigan Slim.

The stumpy fingers closed fiercely upon his shoulder, and the yellow teeth showed themselves in a wolfish snarl; but as Michigan Slim jerked away and half drew a pistol, the speculator laughed shortly, lifting one hand with a deprecatory motion toward the alarmed skeleton.

"Bad whisky has sadly discomfitted your wits, my good fellow, or else your friends give you more credit for sharpness than the law allows. But here—if you can't understand an allegory, I'll sling plain English at your head."

"I know enough to tie a hangman's knot around your neck. By simply lifting a finger I could send you out of the world, and that word would have been spoken, that finger lifted, long ago, if I had not believed that the time would come when the services of a bold, unscrupulous rascal would be worth more to me than a lump of dead carrion."

"Mind you," as the ruffian shrunk back, a dangerous glitter filling his pig eyes, "I don't say this just for the sake of threatening, but to let you see why I am not afraid to show you some of the cards I am playing. I'll put myself on an equal footing with you, thus far. I want a man killed, and I'm willing to pay you a thousand dollars for killing him. With that much of my secret, you need never lie awake thinking over the hold I have on your throat, for you will have the same on mine. Is that plain enough?"

"He must be a p'izen nasty cuss to han'le, fer you to give that much to git him squelched!" muttered Michigan Slim.

"He is a bad man; but so are you. And there is no need of you tackling him openly, when it will be easy enough to strike him from behind. Still, if you know of anybody whom you can implicitly depend upon to help—"

"Don't I, though?" was the swift interruption. "That's my ole side pardners, Ned Burke an' Dan Collins. Kin I take them into the little snap?"

"If you choose; you must use your own judgment. I will pay over the thousand dollars to the person who presents it at my office, with satisfactory proof that the work is done and the reward honestly earned."

"What mought that proof be, boss?"

"John Doe's indorsement, of course," with a short hard laugh. "I'm too much of a business man to pay out money without getting a full receipt in return."

"You want me to sign it on the back, I reckon?" dubiously.

"Yes—but not with a pen. I know how superstitious you ignorant fellows are about putting things in black and white. This job will be a red one; let the indorsement correspond."

"No doubt it's all right, ef you say so, boss," hesitated Michigan Slim, "but durned ef I kin see through it, nobow!"

"I can swear positively to but one feature of the man's face—his nose! Bring that nose, with this paper, and the dust shall be put into your hands without a question."

"An' the boys?" added Michigan Slim. "How much be I to divvy with them?"

"What you choose. I pay you. I know nothing of them in connection with this case, nor must they discover, through you, that I have any interest whatever in the affair. If they do make that discovery, through a slip of your tongue, either accidental or malicious, I'll make sure that you never betray another employer."

"Tell them what you choose about your rea-

sons for killing this John Doe, with that proviso; but if I was to suggest, it would be to keep the existence of that note close secret from those whom you select to help you win it. Let them get an idea of the amount, and you'll have to whack up even—"

"Which I ain't no sech a fool," grinned the living skeleton. "Eyther one o' the boys'd chip in 'long o' me jest fer the fun o' the thing an' a sniff at hot blood, but I'll do the clean white thing by 'em, an' let a yaller eagle bird flip into thar pockets to 'stonish thar fingers."

"Well, talk enough. Get down to business. Stow away this bit o' stiff, and bring it to me when your work is done."

Michigan Slim took the note and hid it in his breast.

"Ef you could only say jest what-fer lookin' critter he was in rig-out an' build, so a body'd be sartin they wasn't wastin' thar powder or steel on the wrong chicken."

"The man I mean is tall, well-built, quick and limber as a steel spring; plenty of gray hair on his head and over his face; dresses rough, like a digger; calls himself Tompoleon Tarbox, I believe—"

"From Purgatoire river?"

Dirigo Branscombe nodded in the affirmative, keenly peering into the face of Michigan Slim with his bloodshot eyes, and uttering a savage snarl as he saw the abrupt change which bore the swift query company.

"What of it? Who is he? What do you know about him?"

"Not much, but a-plenty fer all that to be sure I'll feel more sartin o' winnin' that dust with Ned an' Dan at my back when I tackle him!" muttered Michigan Slim, hitching the butt of a pistol around nearer his hand, as he cast a quick, apprehensive glance up the rocky trail.

"You have seen him, then? When and where?"

"Two or three times, down yender," with a nod toward town. "First time nigh onto a week ago. Billy-be-darned—you've hearn tell o' him I reckon?"

Dirigo Branscombe nodded impatiently.

"Thought so. Mighty tough nut, Billy is, when he gets his skin full o' p'izen an' begins fer to war his hat onto the cend o' his nose; which it was that-a-way the night I see him the fust. Billy smoked him fer a stranger an' a sucker, an' come a-prancin' an' a rarin' up, both wings a-scrapin' an' gaffs a-clickin' together, when what does the stranger do but ketch him round the middle an' sling him through the winder without so much as ay, yes or no—an' Billy-be-darned is layin' flat o' his back from it yit!"

"If you're afraid to tackle him, say so, and I'll hunt up a man," impatiently growled the speculator.

"Oh, I'll do the job, slick enough," hastily returned Michigan Slim. "I did think I'd tackle it single-handed, ruther'n run the risk o' losin' a show by huntin' up my pards; but ef it's that galoot, good backin' won't do me no hurt, an' ef we miss him here on the trail, we'll ketch him in town."

"Take him here if you can. I left him with Rebel George's daughter, and he may dally long enough for you to go and come. Pull out, lively. Mind you; clean work and sure pay."

The ruffian nodded understandingly, and strode swiftly away toward the town, leaving Dirigo Branscombe to follow more leisurely, and endeavor to reach his quarters without showing his dilapidated self to too many curious eyes.

Michigan Slim did not have to spend any time in searching for his boon companions, steering direct for one of the lowest saloons in town, where he found them seated at a dirty table, playing poker with a dirtier deck of cards, wagering immense sums—in their minds—on each hand as dealt.

As they looked up at his entrance, he gave a swift wink that told them what to do, and taking a drink himself, paid for a couple more for them, then left the dive.

Straight out of town he strode, never once looking back, but knowing well that he was being closely followed by the twain, who soon overtook him.

"What's up, pard?" asked Dan Collins, or Triphammer, as he was far better known among his fellows, not so much from the trade he had formerly followed, as on account of his enormous fists and the terrible execution he had been known to do with them in more than one knock-down-and-drag-out affair.

"Right smart chance fer fun, an' good pay bung up fer us 'joyin' of it," cautiously muttered Michigan Slim, with a swift glance around through the rapidly gathering shades of night, as if apprehensive of being overheard by outsiders.

"Durn the fun," growled Ned Burke, a short, thick-set ruffian, with the gallows written in every feature. "What's the pay, an' how much do it come to?"

"Three hundred fer the job, ef it ain't botched."

"It's red work, then," interposed Triphammer.

"S'pose it is? You ain't a-flunkin' at that, be ye?"

"Nary flunk, an' ef it wasn't fer the job ahead, I'd lend ye a bat over the gob fer the hint!" growled Triphammer. "Did you ever hear o' me makin' two bites at one mouthful? I'd slit a dozen thrapples fer the dust, ef I was axed. I only was thinkin' that it must be a powerful hefty job, or else you've struck a lead with a heap more dust in it than sense."

"Durn the chatter!" impatiently growled Burke. "Who is it we're goin' fer, an' who pays the damage?"

"I pay; ain't that enough? Cain't you trust your ole pard?"

"But somebody pays you, don't they? You hain't come into a big fortin', hev ye, which burns yer fingers too bad to keep a tight grip onto? This mornin' you swore you was down to bed-rock; hedn't dust enough to pay fer a smell at a empty kag o' beer. Yit now you're slingin' out hints o' hundreds."

"Which you kin finger jest as soon as the work is did. Ain't that plain enough? Yes or no, an' that in a hurry. I reckon I kin find other boys as would jump at the bait, without stoppin' to smell it all over. I give you the fust chance, as is but right I should, bein's we're ole side-pardners fer a heap o' while. But ef it don't suit ye, spit 'er out."

"It suits us too well, an' that's what ails the cat," grinned Triphammer, gripping the bony paw in his huge fist. "Durned ef I don't believe ye mean it, ole pard, after all; but when you spit out a hull rashal bank without chokin' or splittin' your jaws wide-open, I think ye was stufin' us with wind-puddin'. Ef I didn't, hammer me!"

"Then you're at two both in it?"

"Up to the eyes, an' deeper yit, ef ye ax it, pard."

"Shake—an' now 's swore to—good boys!" chuckled Michigan Slim, working their arms like pump-handles.

"When, whar an' how fur?"

"Soon's we kin spot th' cove, an' clean over the range. It's big pay an' we want to make a clean job of it. We don't want to leave any sound or smell abind us. A 't together, an' with steam enough to send the steel home, clean up to the elbow. An' ef either on us misses his fust lick, burn powder quicker'n a cat kin bat its eye!"

"How many rijiments ye talkin' about, anyway?" sneeringly asked Triphammer. "Tain't any one man, sure-ly!"

"Billy-be-darned reckoned he'd bottled ag'inst a hull division the other night—yit it was only one man, after all."

A low whistle came from the puckered-up lips of the huge ruffian as he interchanged a quick glance with Burke.

"That's the chicken we're to tackle, is it?"

"Jest the same. You ain't goin' back onto the 'rangement, be ye?" growled Michigan Slim. "It's only one man."

"Nary back. Ole Trip is a man o' his word, ef it busts him wide open. But, do you know, pards, that heap o' dust don't look nigh so big as it did a while ago—durned ef it do."

"Too much chin music," grumbled Burke. "Whar's the critter, Mich? Ye know, or must we hunt him up?"

In a few words Michigan Slim explained the situation, and led the way to the foot of the first plateau, where they quickly concealed themselves among the rocks, covering both sides of the narrow, winding trail, so that their game must pass directly between them if he returned to town.

It was an easy task to find secure concealment there; it would have offered no serious difficulties had it been broad daylight instead of early night, before the rising of the moon. On every hand lay scattered rocks, mingled with bushes and stunted trees, and on the level at the base of the descent the three assassins lay in ambush.

Michigan Slim took his position nearest the rise, with Burke and Triphammer stationed a few feet further away, directly opposite each other. The former was to give the signal as soon as their victim had fairly passed him, then all were to attack simultaneously, trusting to steel and surprise.

A warning hiss from Michigan Slim, and they saw the tall form of Tompoleon Tarbox descending the slope, striding swiftly along, all unconscious of the danger which threatened him.

Then—up they leaped, their knives flashing wickedly.

CHAPTER VIII.

TOMPOLEON PLAYS IT ALONE.

WHOLLY unsuspecting of the dangerous surprise which awaited him, Tompoleon Tarbox nimbly descended the steep and winding trail leading from the mesa to the bottom of the valley in which Durango nestled. But his keen eye was ever on the alert, and as the assassins sprang from their hiding-places, and their bared blades glimmered in the clear light of the stars, a single glance showed him the full nature of his peril, and told him that there was but the one way to meet it.

A single moment's delay, the briefest possible hesitation or indecision, would almost certainly have proved fatal. From three sides the ruffians were closing in upon him, intent only on killing him before he could make any outcry or defense. Not far distant lay the town, filled with lights and echoing with the sounds of drunken revelry, early as was the hour. A lusty yell might attract attention; a loud appeal for help might bring rescue; but the one would avail little, and the other come too late to do more than wonder over the corpse and idly surmise how and why it came by its untimely end.

Like one hurled from a mighty catapult, Tompoleon Tarbox leaped forward, striking out viciously with his unarmed right hand, while his left arm was flung upward and outward, dashing aside the glittering knives which otherwise would have reached his life.

Triphammer chanced to be the one within the freest swing of that mighty right arm, and feeling much as though a stone wall had fallen upon him, he reeled back and fell in a heap, his untarnished steel flying far over his head, to clatter harmlessly among the rocks.

With another spring that seemed but a prolongation of the first, Tarbox wheeled half around, even while in motion, and before Michigan Slim or Ned Burke could fairly realize that their cunningly combined assault had failed them, their intended victim was standing at bay, a revolver filling each hand, his sharp voice ringing out sternly:

"Hah's up an' squeal out everlastin'ly lively, 'less ye want to git salivated fer keeps! You're snoopin' down onto the wrong chicken when you tackle ole Tarbox, but ef you reckon I'm your meat, jest come an' see me!"

Crouching like some gaunt cat, Michigan Slim glared at the bold speaker, his pig eyes snapping and glittering with a venomous light, his whole frame quivering as though in preparation for a leap which reason told him must end in death for one or the other.

But instead, his right hand was moving far back behind him, hidden by the shadows around, his bony fingers shifting until they gripped the blade instead of haft. One moment—then the weapon flashed through the air, only making a half-revolution in passing through the intervening space, the keen point aimed straight for the throat of the s ranger.

"Take him, Ned!" grated Michigan Slim, the instant the weapon left his hand, making a swift, cat-like leap forward in a diagonal direction which would carry him to the left of the athletic miner, snatching a revolver from his belt as he made the motion. "Down him fer keeps— Ah!"

To a man one whit less active than Tompoleon Tarbox had that night proven himself, the savage ruse of Michigan Slim would almost assuredly have been fatal; but swift as thought the gray head ducked down, and the flashing steel only carried away the soft felt hat.

Simultaneously one revolver followed the erratic course of the living skeleton, and as the ruffian's feet touched the rocky soil, a spout of flame issued from the dark muzzle and a loud report rent the air.

With a sharp exclamation Michigan Slim checked himself, drawing his lank figure up stiff and rigid as an iron ramrod. His piggy eyes seemed protruding from his head, as they stared straight before him for one instant.

Then a horrible scream of agony burst from his lips, and flinging aloft his arms he fell to the ground in a quivering heap, his pistol discharging itself as it dropped from his nerveless fingers.

That frightful screech and the report were blended with still another explosion, as Ned Burke fired with startled aim at the man who had so unexpectedly turned the tables upon him and his pards, even when their bloody success seemed assured.

The miner athlete felt the sparp sting of the lead, and with a growl of burning rage he half-wheeled and leaped forward, firing twice as he did so—the last powder being burned when the muzzle of his revolver fairly struck the squat ruffian in the face, knocking him backward, his skull fearfully shattered, dead ere his carcass touched the ground.

Thoroughly aroused, his eyes glowing like living coals, Tompoleon Tarbox glared around in search of the third assassin, just in time to get a glimpse of that worthy as he precipitately fled among the rocks, darting from side to side as though to foil the hot lead which might be sent after him.

Only a glimpse, indistinct and fleeting, but Tarbox sent a bullet hissing after the fugitive as it vanished amid the deceptive shadows, and with the fires of battle fiercely blazing in his heart, as he sprang forward in swift pursuit.

Not for many rods. The fleeing ruffian was nowhere to be seen, and as his glowing eyes roved swiftly around in quest, his foot struck against a rock, and he fell heavily forward, the accident coming so unexpectedly that he was unable to save himself.

The shock was so severe that he was fairly knocked breathless, and several minutes elapsed before he could regain his feet or full conscious-

ness. And when he did so, he became aware of a rapidly growing tumult in the direction of the town, and mechanically faced in that direction.

At first he could distinguish nothing save a mass of whirling, dancing lights that seemed fireflies on a drunk, or the distant stars flocking and separating in a mad, fantastic dance, while the yells and shouts of excited human voices were confused with the strange sounds which roared and sung in his ears until it seemed as though his brain would burst.

Only for a brief space did this mental confusion and bewilderment last. Then he realized the truth: that the sounds of firing, of that wild, horrible yell from the lips of the stricken ruffian, had aroused the town, drawing forth its wild population to investigate the matter. More—he realized that his peril was far from being at an end; that, having escaped the lead end steel of the assassins, he would have to foil the deadly noose of lynch-law.

For a moment he hesitated, glancing swiftly around him as though meditating flight, but then the first light of the rising moon beheld his face grow hard and stern, his gray eyes contract their wide pupils as his fingers nimbly ejected the empty cases from his pistols, replacing them with fresh shells.

Rapidly retracing his footsteps until he stood between the two fallen assassins, he raised his voice in a clear shout following it with the words that rung out loud and distinct:

"Hyar ye be—this way, gents!"

Guided as well by his tall figure, which the full moon now revealed with distinctness, the excited crowd flocked around him, every man speaking, pouring forth questions at one and the same time.

"One at a time, gents, an' you'll git yer money's wuth all the quicker," cried Tompoleon, sharply. "Give a feller-critter room to breathe the loud enough to be heard, an' you shell hev the naked truth straight as a die."

He was interrupted by an angry cry from one of the men who was bending curiously over the horribly mutilated form of Ned Burke. Despite the disfigurement, the corpse was recognized by a boon companion.

"It's Ned the Nailer, boys—deader'n a door-nail! Who killed him, an' fer what? That's what I ax ye all!"

"An' yer's another!" echoed a second voice. "Michigan Slim, es I'm a angel! Bored clean through, an' spoutin' blood wuss then a whale in a flurry! Ef that ain't murder, what is it?"

Dark and lowering were the glances which now turned upon Tompoleon Tarbox; harsh and threatening the low words which were muttered among the crowd. But erect and defiant he met the first and heard the latter, flinching not an atom, though he stood but a single man against two score, with still others coming up to the scene of interest.

"Gentlemen!" he cried, with a motion of the hand that commanded attention. "You talk of murder an' foul play, an' look at me as though I was the one at fault. Mebbe I be; but you can't tell that fer sartin without hearin' the facts o' the case—an' you ain't the white men you appear, ef you ain't ready to lis'en to a straight story."

"Fair enough—give the man a show!" cried a clear voice from amid the crowd; and the cry was echoed honestly.

"That's all I ax, gentlemen; a fa'r shake an' no favor," frankly added Tarbox. "That I keeled them two purty boys over fer keeps, I ain't a-denyin'—not any! I did it, an' I'm too proud o' the job, fer to go dodgin' round the corner or hidin' down sullar when the crowner comes to aim his lawful stake by 'cidin' whether the corpusses fell down an' broke thar necks, or the ground flew up an' knocked 'em out o' time."

"Blood for blood!" cried that ominous voice from the obscurity of the crowd. "A long rope and a short pull for all assassins! Talk's cheap, but the proof lies there!"

Another mutter, deeper, more menacing than before. The lines around the stranger drew closer, and there was handling of revolvers, fidgeting of knives. The bomb had been thrown. The short fuse was spitting; a moment, and it would explode.

Still Tompoleon Tarbox did not shrink or falter. Straight and bold he faced the peril, one against many, a man all over.

"Gentlemen," he said coolly, as though addressing none but his bosom friends, "I like to see a man churn out his 'pinions whenever they git ripe an' ready, without stoppin' to think what wall they're goin' to hit ag'inst an' stick to; but the cabbage-head as bu'sted jest now suits me too durned well! Ef ary one o' ye'd be kind enough fer to jest shove that howlin' monkey forward a bit, so I kin see whether he's a nat'ral noncomatus, or only a feller critter whose brain-pan hes cracked with crowdin' too much emptiness into it, I'd look onto it as a mighty favor, not to be forgotten while grass runs an' water grows—which is a bit o' ontamed po'try fer them as kin rattle with sech high-toned chuck."

A little ripple of laughter along the edges of the mob. With this, as with all others com-

posed of the same material, there is only one step dividin' the sublime from the ridiculous—but one word necessary to decide whether tragedy or farce shall occupy the stage for the hour.

Had Tompoleon Tarbox showed a trace of fear or agitation in that supreme moment; had his voice trembled, his bold front turned even a shade, that evil voice would almost surely have prevailed, and unreasoning lynch-law have claimed another victim, perhaps to have regretted the hasty act when too late.

"That's fair enough for any hog!" cried one blunt voice. "Michigan Slim nur Ned the Nailer weren't sech howlin' saints that we need crucify the man that sent 'em to glory, without even axin' what they done fer to airm them free passes. Thar ye got my senterments, mates, an' Wes. Harcastle never yit was a-skeered to clap his name to what his tongue writ down."

"Thank ee, mate," said Tarbox, with an approving nod toward the bold speaker. "Ef all men was as honest as you, thar wouldn't be no need o' fightin' buzzin' skeeters fer a livin', nur yit hittin' back at a shadder that cain't endure the light o' the moon even, but sneaks in the blackest dark fer a chaine to punch a man in the back."

"Thar's enough o' white men here fer to see thet you hev all the show you're 'titled to, ole man," added Harcastle; "but ef you cain't read your title clear, I've got a couple o' pick-slingers that's ready crooked fer rope-pullin'."

"Which a hog couldn't ax no more, an' ef I cain't show up a clean record in this little muzz, I'll fit the noose 'round my own neck, an' make the pullin' up as light as I kin."

"I was comin' long this trail, easy an' keel-less like, when three laddy-bucks jumped out onto me, with thar stings drawn fer hot work. They got it, too, a little hotter'n they made cackilations fer, I reckon. Two on 'em took a tumble to tharselves, an' you kin see 'em right here. T'other one must 'a' 'cluded he had 'portant business callin' fer his presence some're else in a hurry, jedgin' from the way he made tracks when he see his pards lay down to say thar prayers. But whoever he was, he kerries my mark with him; four knuckles, all in a row, painted in fast colors, red, an' green, an' blue, an' yaller, some's about his ugly phizog."

A moment's silence; then a startled cry from those of the interested crowd who stood nearest the body of Michigan Slim.

A hasty falling back, as the bony frame suddenly assumed a sitting posture, one long arm raised and pointing at Tompoleon Tarbox—then a husky, death-weakened voice rattled:

"It's a durn lie—a lie from fust to last! He jumped us when we wasn't lookin'—him an' his pard. It's bloody murder—he didn't give us a show. Hell's fires—burn him—ferever an'—ev—ah-h!"

A horrible, gurgling, gasping groan that was clearly intended for a malediction; then the ruffian fell back, his head striking the ground with a dull thump that sent the chilled blood curdling through many veins.

An ominous silence that lasted for a full minute, during which eyes sought eyes to read a confirmation of the opinions then formed or forming; then Wes. Harcastle strode forward and placed one hand upon the shoulder of Tompoleon Tarbox.

"As a man speakin' to a man, pard, I ax ye to think twice afore ye try to use them weepins your fingers is grippin'. Take it cool, an' you shell hev a fa'r show fer your life. But ef a grain o' powder is burnt, or a lick struck afore the hull truth comes out, salt won't save ye!"

His eyes glowing hotly, the accused glanced around him. His trained senses could not help seeing that the crowd was dividing, gradually but surely, into two parties, nor could he mistake the cause. The smaller, but more respectable appearing portion seemed in sympathy with Harcastle, while the more numerous rabble gave vent to black threats and ominous growls.

Other eyes made the same discovery, and the evil voice called out in clearer accents, no longer disguised:

"Would a dying man testify to a lie? Gentlemen, you all know that I am a law-and-order man myself, but when it comes to assassinating a couple of poor devils like these, it's high time the rope was brought to the front for the good of the honest, law-abiding portion of our little community!"

"That's the talk! Lis'en to the boss!"

"Who's got a rope? Fetch a rope, somebody!"

"String up the p'izen sarpint an' hitch the two pore lads to his heels, so they kin help stretch his thrapple!"

Fiercely howled the mob, gaining fresh strength with the passage of each moment, but bravely did Harcastle confront the peril, while Tarbox cried aloud, in tones of bitter scorn:

"You're the squealin' high-kicker, then, Foxy Branscombe? I thought I knowed the voice when you out with the fust cowardly yelp, but I couldn't jest swaller it, fer I 'lowed you'd be in bed afore this, or settin' on a mighty soft piller, howlin' fer a poultice to draw out the sting o' boot-leather!"

"This way, boys, you who want to see fa'r play an' honest justice did to your fellow-critters!" cried Hardcastle.

Promptly the appeal was answered, and a dozen brave, stern-faced citizens ranged themselves beside him. Four times that number stood in opposition, many with weapons drawn in readiness for use, the mad lust for blood raging in their hearts, hesitating before taking the first step in what all knew must then end in the death of more than one on either side.

Brave as the bravest, Wesley Hardcastle nevertheless was anxious to avoid such a collision, and cried aloud:

"Now, gents, we don't want no muss ef we kin git along without it; but all the same, this man hes got to hev a fa'r an' squar' show fer his life, ef we hev to fight fer it while thar's a man left with power to pull trigger or han'le a blade. That's plain talk, an' I'm givin' it to ye straight."

"So much the blacker shame to honest men like you, Wes. Hardcastle!" cried Branscombe, hoarsely. "Shielding a foul, cowardly assassin—for shame!"

"Prove that he's what ye say, sir, an' I'll stan' aside without a word ag'in' the hangin'," was the quiet retort.

"You heard—we all heard the dying declarations of that poor fellow lying yonder. We have his corpse and that of another luckless wretch, as proof of his accusation. Against it—what? The unsupported word of a man taken red handed! And yet you hesitate, still you defend the murderer!"

"Some o' you boys take a peep at Michigan Slim," coolly uttered Hardcastle, without replying to the hot speech of the speculator. "He come to life once, when all thunk he was dead; mebbe he's got life enough into him fer to tell a straight story, when he's axed proper fer it."

A man from each party hastened to the side of the fallen ruffian, but it needed little more than a passing glance to assure them that his life had fled forever. Still, they knelt beside him, and tore open his blood-stained garments, to put all doubts to flight. Then, with a little cry of amazement, the man from the ranks opposed to Tompoleon Tarbox rose with a strip of paper in his hand, bloody, but intact.

"Hyar's the proof!" he cried, with a ferocious exultation in his face, his every tone.

With a motion swift as light, Hardcastle disarmed Tarbox and passed the weapons to one of his supporters.

"Ef you're innocent, you won't need 'em; ef guilty, they're safer in other hands," he hastily muttered, in explanation.

Only the prisoner could hear the words spoken, for a loud and eager storm of questions assailed the man who had announced the important discovery. And soaring high above the wild tumult, the fellow read aloud the words written upon the strip of paper, even to the signature.

A brief period of breathless silence. A note for one thousand dollars, signed with the name of Dirigo Branscombe! But to one John Doe, and in the possession of Michigan Slim! What did it all mean? Was it proof as positive as the fluder had proclaimed? At first he had so believed, but now he began to doubt, as he looked around upon those wondering faces, and listened to the startled comments.

"It's a foul forgery!" cried Branscombe, his voice hardly recognizable in its husky fury. "I never wrote or signed any such paper, and—"

"Go slow, Mr. Branscombe," warningly cried the man who had assisted at the finding. "I am willing to take my oath that the note is in your handwriting—and I should know, if any man, for I've seen enough of both it and the signature."

"Let me see it!" growled the speculator, crowding forward.

"Hold it fast, mate!" cried Tarbox. "He wants to tear it up afore it kin be swore to! Thank the good Lord, the clouds is a-clearin' away mighty fast! That's the price he paid fer my life—but it wouldn't work!"

A tall, portly man sprung forward and grasped Branscombe by the arm, before he could reach the spot where the note was held. Low as they were, his words were audible to all:

"Brace up and be yourself, Branscombe. You're only doing yourself harm, by giving way to rage. They can't give it on you, if it's a forgery, and the trick will only recoil the more heavily upon their own shoulders, when the matter is investigated and the truth established."

"As for you, sir," turning toward Tarbox and speaking with cold emphasis, "take care how you fling your foul insinuations around so loosely. He, a gentleman, hire you killed? Bah! the idea is worse than preposterous!"

"I don't know who you may be, mister man," began Tarbox, only to be sharply interrupted by the other.

"My name is Elias Aiken. I am this gentleman's partner in business, and his life-long friend. If he wrote or signed that note, I can and will swear to it, in a court of justice, if

needs be. But I know he didn't—why should he? What reason can he have for wishing your death? For conspiring with men of that class? The very idea is its denial."

"You're honest in what you say, fer your voice is that of a white man," said Tompoleon; with more coolness than he had displayed, as he saw the note securely stowed away by his adherent. "But all the same, you're barkin' fer a mighty mean critter in the shape of a man, when you hold up Foxy Branscombe as a gentleman."

"I asked for proof, not blackguardism," sternly.

"An' the proof is right afore your face, ef the moonlight was only powerful enough to let ye read it. Look on that face, an' you'll see the prints o' my fingers writ thar in red letters. An' ef them two coat-tails could whisper English talk, you'd hear them howl about how a boss-hide boot, number ten, sought a momentary hidin'-place 'mong the shadders they cast—an' found it, too, betcher sweet life it jest did!"

"You lie, curse you!" howled Branscombe, snatching at a weapon, but only to be checked by the strong hand of Aiken.

"Ef you've got any story to tell, man, spit it out in plain talk, an' make it as short as you kin," said Hardcastle.

"All right, gents. Yere you git it: I ketched that p'izen cuss a'sultin' of a lady, no longer ago then a hour by sun. He ketched her in his arms, an' was kissin' of her, when I happened that way, an' hearin' her cry fer help, I give it the best I knowed how."

"I made him git down onto his marrer-bones an' eat dirt at the feet o' the leddy. When he got up, he tried to sink a mineral shaft cl'ar through me, an' I jest slapped his face, flat-handed. You kin see the marks o' my fingers, now, ef you look. Then I tuck him to the door, an' tole him to make tracks in a hurry. Fer fear he shouldn't gita good start, I jest drewed back my old toad-smasher, here, an' gently inserted it underneath his two coat-tails. He started—waal, he did, honey! I'm givin' it straight. He started quicker'n scat, an' a heap more gracefuller'n a bull-frog. He come down all right onto his hoof, but he didn't know how to stop, so well. He bumped his nose an' turned over an' over, an' I raaly reckon he'd 'a' bin turnin' summersets clean to now, ef he hedn't fetched up ag'in' a rock."

Foxy Branscombe forced a harsh laugh, as though to express his utter scorn of this ridiculous tale, but even his partner, with all desire to believe him in the right, was perceptibly affected by the prompt, off-hand manner in which the accused told his story, and tightened his grip warningly.

"That's a flat yarn, gents," observed Hardcastle, tersely. "It comes straight to the point. What you got to say ag'in' it, Mr. Branscombe?"

"Nothing, save that it is a tissue of foul lies from beginning to end, without one grain of fact to support it!"

"Turn your sweet mug up to the moonlight, an' let the gents see ef you don't kerry my mark," laughed Tarbox, now entirely at ease as to the ultimate ending of the affair. "Ef it was polite, I'd ax ary surgeon in the 'sembly fer to take a distant squint at the print o' my boot; but mebbe that'd shock yer modesty 'most too much."

"This is no time for ribaldry," sternly uttered Aiken. "It comes down to a matter of veracity between you two men. Mr. Branscombe is a gentleman. You—are not you the ruffian who was mixed up in a disgraceful, drunken row last week, when a fellow called Billy-be-darned was badly injured?"

"I pitched him through the winder fer tryin' to 'pose on good natur', sartin; but the man who says I was drunk or to blame fer the row, comes jest a leetle nigher a lie then the law 'lows him—to speak politely," laughed Tarbox.

"I have heard enough. Gentlemen, I have only this to add: That ruffian has killed two men. I demand that he be placed under arrest for the crime."

"You change your tune almighty sudden, Mr. Aiken," said Hardcastle, sarcastically. "Kin it be beca'se of what Foxy Branscombe jest now whispered into your ear?"

"I will hold you personally accountable for that insult."

"Just as you please,"—indifferently. "Fer now, we've more 'portant fish to frv. Thar's a lie mixed up into this scrape which may explain the bull matter, an' I'm gittin' at that. You say you ketched him 'sultin' a lady. Give her name."

Tompoleon scratched his nose thoughtfully before saying:

"I don't like to lug a lady's name into sech a dirty muss, but I reckon it's a ground-hog case with me. Her name is Naomi Bretto, daughter o' the man knowed as Rebel George."

A cry of indignation went up from the crowd at this announcement, and with a howl of fury Branscombe tore free from Aiken and fired at his accuser, who fell in a heap before the treacherous shot, so sudden and unexpected.

CHAPTER IX.

ELEPHANT TOM TALKS BUSINESS.

EVEN as that deadly grip was fastened upon his neck and shoulder, Rebel George recognized the voice of the man whom he had sent reeling back before the discharge of his revolver—Elephant Tom, of Durango.

But he was given no time for struggling. A desperate jerk and a tug brought his shoulders back against the door, which gave way before the shock, and he tumbled out of the stage, striking heavily upon the back of his head as he was torn from the grip of the outlaw chief.

Elephant Tom raised his clubbed revolver and brought it down, with a dull, sodden sound. With a quivering, spasmodic motion, Rebel George flung out his arms, then lay motionless on his face, and uttering a short laugh of brutal triumph, Elephant Tom turned once more toward the coach.

Albert Matney had shown far more grit than properly belonged to that clerical suit and sedate glasses, promptly seconding the efforts of Rebel George, though with far more certain results.

Seemingly used to have their mere challenge and appearance do their work, without burning powder or fleshing the steel they so ostentatiously displayed, the road-agents shrunk away from that side of the coach as the black muzzle of a loaded revolver was thrust through the window and began spitting forth bullets ticketed with death.

Once, twice, a masked and cowed figure staggered back, gasping, gurgling, reeling, only to fall in a heap, dead or dying before that swift and accurate aim. With yells and curses of mingled rage and fear, the survivors shrunk still further back instead of pressing to close quarters, and for a few brief moments, it really seemed as though the entire band would owe their signal defeat to the prowess of a single man.

Thus matters stood when Elephant Tom turned from Rebel George, and a single glance showed him how matters stood with his bully men. A grating curse bitted from between his teeth, as he sprung forward, straight in through the shattered door from whence he had dragged Rebel George, and as Matney thrust his head and shoulders through the opposite window the better to secure a fresh aim, the road-agent dealt him a crushing blow upon the head, then flung his whole weight against his head and shoulders, bursting the shaky door from its rusty hinges, both men tumbling out upon the ground.

Scrambling to his feet again as his men came flocking around him, Elephant Tom caught a second pistol from his belt, and leveling it at the prostrate figure discharged one shot.

"That settles you, my ruffling gamecock!" he snarled, as the unfortunate fellow half raised himself from the ground, only to sink back limp and nerveless.

"He's laid out two o' the boys too dead to skin!" exclaimed a tall ruffian nearest the chief. "Ain't it the ones we wanted, boss?"

"Clap a stopper on that jawin' tackle o' yours, an' act!" growled the outlaw chief. "If you'd done your share of the work as well as I did mine, the boys wouldn't—"

Without finishing his speech, Elephant Tom flung up his revolver and discharged it on the instant.

Within the coach, startled, stupefied, new to such wild and reckless doings, Horatio Adair had sat bolt upright in his seat while the brief but desperate affray lasted, but when a moaning cry escaped the lips of his daughter, as the heavy feet of Elephant Tom rudely trampled her under foot in the short struggle which ended in his hurling Albert Matney out of the coach, and he saw that for the moment the outlaws were otherwise occupied, his wits suddenly returned, and through the little opening back of his head he called to the driver:

"A thousand dollars if you whip up and get safe to Durango! Quick! Now's your time, while they're busy!"

"I'll do it or bust a trace!" was the swift response, and the whipcord whistled through the air and cut through hair and hide.

Snorting, the animals sprung forward, only to have one of their number plunge headlong, shot through the kidneys by the lead of the outlaw chief. Like an echo came the second shot, and the luckless driver toppled forward from his seat, falling between his kicking, snorting, plunging wheelers.

"Grab the horse, some of you fellows!" thundered Elephant Tom. "The rest cover that hearse, and if another shot comes from it, turn your barkers loose and riddle it like a sieve!"

With a promptness of action that spoke volumes for his complete authority over them, the road-agents sprung to carry out the instructions given, and as several stalwart fellows caught and overmastered the plunging horses, Elephant Tom strode to the door of the coach, his revolver commanding the interior, his voice rumbling menacingly:

"Tumble out of there, old gent—you and the lady; in a hurry, too! I'm a sucking dove for patience and tenderness of heart, but I've got one leg over the line, on the other side of which

forbearance ceases to be a virtue. Come—I don't want to lay you alongside those two hot-headed fools, but I'll have to do it, unless you listen to reason. Out with you!"

"It's a shameful outrage—"

"Half a dozen of 'em for what I care," impatiently interrupted the chief. "In there, Blinky, and tumble 'em out. Handle the petticoats tenderly, but you needn't stop to pull on your gloves to chuck out that old fool. Lively, now!"

One of the masked figures started forward, but yielding to the inevitable, Horatio Adair lifted the half-unconscious form of Maura in his arms and stepped out of the coach.

"Just in time, my dear fellow," laughed Elephant Tom, apparently hugely enjoying the sternly indignant glance which Mr. Adair bestowed upon him. "That dainty bit o' dry goods might have been ruffled in the rude grasp of honest Blinky."

"What do you want?" demanded Adair, now thoroughly aroused and showing his true metal as he had never done before. "If your object is robbery, do your work in silence, and suffer us to resume our journey. We are helpless, wholly in your power. There is no need of adding insult to injury."

With a theatrical wave of his hand, Elephant Tom struck an attitude before the indignant gentleman, saying:

"Gaze upon me, thou high-and-mighty chancieeer. Call thy twin peepers into active play, and ponder upon this noble brow. Is not the handsome phizog familiar to thee? Canst not recognize the loved countenance of a long lost be-rother? Dost not thy panting heart swell and bubble within thy buzzom like a tub-full of joy at this unexpected-but-never-to-be-sufficiently-glorified meeting with the prodigal cuss? Gaze thy fill, oh noble be-rother, then come to me arrums and bathe this clear-starched, bald-faced shirt with the long pent-up briny!"

His dignified form drawn rigidly erect, Horatio Adair gazed fixedly upon the speaker, marveling in his mind whether or no he had fallen into the clutches of a lunatic.

What he beheld was sufficiently curious to deserve a detailed description.

Elephant Tom was but little, if any, above the medium height of mankind, but what he lacked in altitude, he more than made up in breadth of shoulders and thickness of body, looking like some giant razed by an unsparing hand.

Upon his head was a wide-brimmed hat, from the edge of which depended a fine, silken fringe, which, with the shadow of the hat, rendered his countenance dim and indistinct. Yet enough could be seen to prove that it was no ordinary one.

A dull, bluish cast pervaded such of the skin as the long beard and heavy mustaches left uncovered. His eyes were bright and keen, though seemingly deep sunken in their sockets. His nose was a marvel, huge almost beyond belief, warty and bulbous at the extremity that kept time to the motion of his tongue, wagging slightly from side to side, and then moving up and down in feeble imitation of the untrained trunk of a just-born elephant.

His attire was of fine materials, but flashy in color, loud in cut. A solitary pin flashed in the bosom of his white shirt, and just beneath it could be seen a scorched and powder-burned hole where Rebel George had planted a bullet. Yet Elephant Tom showed no signs of having been wounded, nor was the hole marked with any trace of blood.

"Not a word, not a howl of joy at the discovery?" whined the outlaw, with mock injury in his tones; then swiftly altering his manner as he added, sharply:

"You wanted to know how the notorious Elephant Tom looked, and I've given you the chance to form your conclusions; now to business, pure and simple."

"Fetch the horses, boys. Some of you tumble the carrion over into the ditch. If our mates are fairly across the river and past feeling or squealing, let them take the same trail. We can't fetch them back by piping our eyes, nor give them a sounder sleep by planting them with the worms. Take their tools, and dump them over, after you've turned their pockets wrong side out."

"One of those gentlemen was my secretary—"

"Don't care if he was your bookcase or trundle-bed," the road-agent rudely interposed. "He's past doing you further service, and maybe your own case will call for all your powers of sympathy."

"But of course we are at liberty to go our way, after you have robbed us," uttered Adair, but with ill-concealed doubts.

"Oh, of course!" laughed Elephant Tom, lifting one hand.

Two stout men fastened upon Adair, pinning his arms and throwing him to the ground, while Elephant Tom caught the sinking form of the senseless maiden in his arms.

With swift dexterity that spoke volumes for their experience and training, the road-agents bound and gagged the old man, then lifted him into the saddle of a horse which, with others, was

just brought forth from the spot where they had been concealed to await the result of the ambush. A lasso was used to bind him fast in the saddle, then Elephant Tom, who meantime had been restoring Maura to consciousness by the liberal application of brandy to her temples and nostrils, raised her in his arms and placed her upon the horse, behind her parent, holding her in position while his fellows tied her securely to Adair.

"I don't want to treat a lady with unnecessary harshness," he said, speaking rapidly, "but I'm playing for too heavy stakes to throw away a chance. If you are sensible and keep your tongue between your teeth, I'll leave your pretty lips at liberty. But at the first word or cry, I'll have you gagged like the old gentleman. A word to the wise, my lady!"

Maura made no reply. Indeed, her brain was whirling, her senses scattered, and she could but dimly comprehend what had taken place. It seemed all like some horrible dream, from which she strove to tear herself, but in vain.

Elephant Tom climbed clumsily into his saddle, then led the way through the night, leaving the corpses in the ditch, the terrified, trembling horses harnessed to the coach and their dead mate, blocking up the narrow trail, to remain thus until some passer-by should rescue them, or else to dash off in frenzied fright, to tear themselves free, or plunge headlong to death into the gulch.

Without a word being spoken to the miserable captives, or passing between themselves, the road-agents pressed on through the night at a brisk pace, winding through hills and gulches, passing isolated valleys and miniature prairies of grass or deserts of sand, to finally draw rein before a dense fringe of bushes and stunted trees which appeared to grow directly against the face of a towering cliff.

Awkwardly alighting from his horse, Elephant Tom waved a stumpy arm toward the two men who had charge of the prisoners, then plunged into the shrubbery, immediately vanishing from view.

With nimble fingers the road-agents unknotted the thongs which held Horatio Adair and his daughter upon the horse, and easing their half-beumbed forms to the ground, hurried with them into the bushes.

Instinctively they shrunk back, expecting to come in contact with the rocks, but instead they found themselves being conducted through a dark, contracted passage of a few rods in length, to issue into a small, secluded "pocket" beyond the rocky barrier, through which a freak of nature, or the hand of man, had formed an archway amply sufficient to admit the passage of man, though too narrow for the admission of their four-footed bearers.

Stunned, her brain almost paralyzed by all she had that evening been called upon to undergo, Maura Adair was only dimly conscious of the fact that she was being separated from her parent, and though she uttered a faint, pitiful appeal, her masked and cowed conductor paid no attention, other than to tighten his grasp upon her wrist and pass an arm around her waist as he pressed on to the upper end of the little pocket.

The two men who had immediate charge of Horatio Adair, closely followed the lead of Elephant Tom, turning to the right, where the man with Maura took the opposite course, and halting only when the almost perpendicular rocks forbade their further progress in that direction.

"Drop him down and take a bitch or two around his hoofs before you unlimber his tongue, lads," grunted the outlaw chief, sinking with a lazy grunt upon the green sward, here thick and soft as the neatly-kept pleasure-grounds of a lord.

His directions were obeyed with the unquestioning celerity shown by the road-agents from their first appearance on the scene, the high-and-mighty chief deigning to nod his approval as he added fresh instructions:

"One of you start up a bit of fire, while the other gets a couple of torches from the storehouse. I've got a little bit of business deal to make with this gentleman, and he sha'n't have it to say that he was led into it blindfold."

The usually cold, light-blue eyes of Horatio Adair were fairly blazing with indignation as they turned upon the insolent road-agent, and there was not the slightest trace of the slow, almost drawing manner of speech customary with him, each word issuing from his lips, quick and distinct:

"You can rob me—murder me, if you will. I know I am wholly at your mercy. But beyond the small amount of money on my person, and my life, you will gain absolutely nothing by this foul outrage."

"That's your say-so, old fellow; but I'm open to lay odds that you'll come down quicker'n Martin Scott's coon, when I fairly open my battery on your breastworks. Mind you, I'm not saying that you are lacking in grit, for unless rumor lies most confoundedly, the time has been when you have proved yourself a tough nut for almost any man to crack; but in defying me, you forget that your daughter is quite as much at my mercy as you are yourself."

"You dare not harm her, cowardly villain though you be!"

"My dear sir," drawled Elephant Tom, with a languid wave of one stumpy arm. "I dare anything in the strict line of business. Personally speaking, I would much rather whisper soft nothings into the shell-like ear of the charming Maura, to following any harsher course, but at the same time, if my financial interests spurred me on, I would bite off that same precious member with just as little hesitation."

An involuntary shudder crept over the prisoner as he listened to this diabolically candid statement, for it was uttered in a tone that convinced him of the road-agent's perfect sincerity. For the first time, he began to fairly realize the extent of the peril into which the startling events of that evening had led him and his.

A brilliant blaze shot up from the little pile of twigs, upon which the outlaw was now piling larger sticks, while the second ruffian returned with a couple of rude tin lamps, swung at the end of wooden staves, the sharpened points of which he thrust into the ground, one on either side of the chief, then ignited the wicks with a blazing brand.

"That looks a little more like business," said Elephant Tom, sitting up and pushing back the fringe from before his eyes. "Though properly a bird of the night, I'm fond of good light when it comes down to strict business."

Turning to the road-agents who stood in silence as though awaiting his further orders, he said:

"That will do. Go and see that my horse is cared for. I have to reach Durango before midnight."

Under the red glare of fire and torches, Horatio Adair could see that the hideous countenance of the notorious outlaw was in reality a cunningly manufactured mask, though of material so flexible as to obey the slightest movement of the actual features beneath it.

This much he noted, when Elephant Tom turned upon him with a mocking laugh and jeering tones:

"You're the first person outside the family that has divined as much, old fellow; nor would you have done so had I cared to prevent. But with this night Elephant Tom will disappear as suddenly and as mysteriously as he made his first appearance. Thanks to your ill-gotten wealth, from this ugly chrysalis will issue a butterfly, gorgeous and brilliant-hued enough to banish all memory of the hairy worm which gave it birth. Ah! that is the thought which consoled me while wearing this hideous disguise; which reconciled me to—Bah!" he abruptly broke off, with a hard, disagreeable laugh. "I'm growing sentimental, when I should attend to business instead."

Leaning forward, with his knees supporting his elbows, the stumpy finger of one gloved hand emphasizing his words, he spoke rapidly:

"Your name is Horatio Adair. You are the moneyed man and senior partner in the firm of Adair, Aiken & Branscombe, whose head office is at Durango. You and your partners deal and speculate in mining-claims, do a vast loaning business, and carry more ready capital than any dozen other firms in the State. Am I not correct, so far?"

Horatio Adair glared at him sullenly but made no reply.

CHAPTER X.

ELEPHANT TOM REMOVES HIS MASK.

"SILENCE gives consent, but in this case there is none needed," coolly resumed Elephant Tom. "I have the whole history of you three precious scoundrels at my fingers' ends, and I can't think of a better way of prefacing the demand I am about to make than by giving a hasty sketch of one act of deliberate wrong which is recorded against the Triad, as you rascals were fond of styling yourselves in those days."

Horatio Adair gave a violent start as he heard this title, and a shade of pallor crept over his flushed countenance. His lips parted as if to speak, but then closed again rigidly.

Elephant Tom laughed, hard and mockingly.

"Too late, old fellow! You started at the prick too perceptibly to hide it now, and if I entertained the ghost of a doubt before, I would now be dead certain that I am barking along the right trail."

"Years ago—no need to be more definite, for even if a constant succession of successful rascalities since that day has blunted your memory, your recollection will grow clear enough as I proceed—a wild, shiftless devil, when worst down on his luck, made a strike that laid fair to put him on the catalogue of millionaire miners; but, unluckily for him, as it proved in the end, he fell into the clutches of the Triad, and before the end came they stripped him to the buff, winding up by chucking him behind the bars, on a trumped-up charge of criminal assault and attempted robbery."

"That is the story in brief. What have you to say about its truth, Horatio Adair?"

"That it is false, from beginning to end!" sharply.

"Do you deny the discovery of that mine? Do you deny getting possession of it, and mas-

ing a fortune out of the property, while the discoverer and actual owner of it all, pined behind the prison bars, thrust there by you three men?"

"I deny that there was any fraud on the part of either myself or of my partners. I deny that the wretch was unjustly condemned. We were in negotiation for the mine, and had almost agreed as to terms, when he came to us one night, crazy with liquor, and forced me to play him for the mining-claim, himself naming the price to be staked against it. I tried my level best to get out of it, as a score of trusted citizens voluntarily bore witness afterward, but he swore that he would kill us, one after the other, unless we yielded.

"He named his own game, named all the conditions, and I unwillingly, in the dread of his carrying out his mad threats, or else forcing me to slay him in self-defense, played with him, and in the end won the stakes.

"The very next night he broke into my room and tried to steal the title-deeds, but we had anticipated some such desperate act, and were together on our guard.

"Under any law, we would have been fully justified in shooting him down as a common thief, but instead of doing so we leaped upon him and though there was a desperate struggle, took him prisoner, turned him over to the proper authorities, by whom he was accorded a full and fair trial, which resulted in his conviction and condemnation to State's prison."

"Did he not make solemn oath that his liquor was furnished him by you three men, that it was drugged, and that while in this condition, hardly conscious of his being alive, you forced him to play cards for his claim?"

"A clumsy defense, which availed him nothing," sneered the prisoner. "It was proven false on its face and so the court decided. We courted the closest investigation and it was given, with the result of clearing us of every suspicion."

"Only another instance of money proving all-powerful! But the prisoner; do you remember the oath he swore, before he was dragged to jail?"

"It was crazy babbling. I gave it not a second thought."

"Yet there was method in his madness. He never forgot that oath. He never once lost sight of his sworn vengeance, though he served for years in the prison to which you and your pards consigned him, and spent many more years after his release before he could strike the trail of the Triad."

"A lie! He died in prison—cut his throat with a bit of rusty tin, which he contrived to get hold of, no one ever knew how, and bled to death before his condition was discovered. You lie when you say he lived to serve out his sentence and leave the prison a free man!" cried Adair, harshly.

Elephant Tom laughed shortly.

"So the tale got abroad, I admit; but the ending was exaggerated greatly. He not only lived, but still lives, the memory of his wrongs even more vivid than when they first overwhelmed him—lives to punish you and the other members of the Triad, as he so solemnly vowed; lives to take back the wealth of which he was so shamefully defrauded in the olden days, with compound interest. Ay! lives, and has grown wondrously more cunning and keen-witted than when you first crossed his trail in life.

"Shall I prove what I say? Listen:

"You were at Denver, when you received a dispatch from Durango, in the secret cipher invented by yourself, and used only by the Triad, purporting to come from your partners, bidding you hasten to them without a moment's unnecessary delay, to help them stave off certain ruin. You believed the dispatch—as why should you doubt its authenticity?—and set out at once, without the loss of an hour. But, instead of that dispatch coming from your partners, they not only believe you still at Denver, but your mutual interests were never in a more flourishing condition than at this hour."

In mute amazement Horatio Adair stared at the speaker, unable to believe the evidence of his own senses.

"Then who did send it?" he gasped, at length.

"The man whom you and your partners in crime so basely robbed, years ago. Why? To lure you into his power, out here where nature can be the judge, when you are brought to trial.

"In only one point was he unable to foresee precisely what has occurred; the coming of your daughter. But that, too, is in his favor, since what he might possibly fail to wring from you, he can gain by using her, and playing on your paternal affections."

"Devil—fiend!" hoarsely snarled Adair, struggling furiously to burst his bonds, but in vain.

"A clear case of the pot's calling the kettle black," the road-agent laughed, mockingly, as he coolly watched the vain struggles of his caged victim.

"Who are you?" demanded Adair, worn out by his furious endeavors at length, lying still and panting heavily as he glared into the grotesquely masked face of his tormentor.

"Just at present, Elephant Tom of Durango, a road-agent, a pot, a tax collector, a stage inspector—what you will. And, if that information is not quite definite enough, let me add: your judge *your confederate*, should you prove so obstinate as to require the services of the latter functionary."

"A fitting tool for the drunken thief and would-be assassin whose story you have pretended to relate!" sneered the captive, seemingly casting off the weight of years with the stiff artificial demeanor, which of late had served as an icy barrier between himself and the outer world.

"Another mistake, Horatio Adair," was the cold interposition. "I am no man's tool. I serve only myself. In my busy brain was concocted this plot, and my skill alone has engineered it thus far on the road to completion."

"But you said—" faltered Adair, growing bewildered for the moment, as he vainly strove to see through the tangle.

"If I did not I do now," with an impatient wave of the hand. "I wrote that dispatch. I sent it to you. And the moment you stepped aboard the train a trusty confederate wired me the fact, then jumped aboard, and seated directly behind you, looked over your shoulder as you took out your pass and showed the conductor. Then, having ascertained beyond all doubt that you were on your way to Durango, he stepped off at the next station to announce that important fact."

"He bore you company clear through the trip, wiring me from each station, so that by no possibility could I mistake the train on which you would reach Durango—if permitted."

Elephant Tom paused, as though for the purpose of catching breath, and Horatio Adair, who had stared at the outlaw, intensely interested in his statement, broke out with:

"You tried to wreck the train—to kill me you were willing to slaughter a hundred other persons?"

Elephant Tom laughed sneeringly, harshly.

"Bah! Rumor must have lied most scandalously in giving you the name of a sharp, clear-witted speculator, keen as a brier, ready to take immediate advantage of the slightest error or miscalculation and turn it to your own advantage, with powers of perception such as no adversary could foil or deceive. All this you have received wide credit for, and yet you are still hoodwinked, still blinking from the dust thrown into your eyes by that amusing little farce back yonder!"

Horatio Adair stared helplessly into the hideous mask before him, striving in vain to clear his brain, to pierce the mental fog which seemed growing deeper and deeper, more thick and tangled with the utterance of each word spoken by Elephant Tom. One moment he seemed to catch a glimmer of the truth, only to have it blotted out before he could fairly grasp the clew, and, with a low, angry mutter, he gave over the vain task.

"You think it was a genuine attempt at wrecking the train, which was prevented only by the heroic self-devotion of a single man, who most nobly risked his own life to preserve those of his fellow-creatures? A most glorious deed, was it not? Well worthy being recorded in letters of gold on tablets of purest marble? Ay! if it had been reality, I grant you. As it was, a most adroit piece of acting!"

"What? you mean that—Bah!" with an angry grunt, as he averted his glowing eyes. "I am a fool for listening—and you a still more arrant one for thinking to deceive me with such a clumsy lie as that!"

"You are wondrously wise, and marvelously acute, my dear sir," mockingly. "It would be rank folly for a poor, sluggish-witted fool like me to attempt throwing dust in your eyes, and for that reason I'll give the truth to you, straight as a die, without attempting to whitewash it in the least."

"To hark back; have you forgotten the name of the man you cheat—I should say financiered out of his claim?"

"George Brent. But it was an assumed name, as was proven at the trial," muttered Adair, after a brief hesitation.

"Precisely; George Bretto was the discovery made then. As such he was condemned, as such he served his time, and as such he emerged from the prison gates, to take up the trail of vengeance for which alone he lived. But another name was given him, and by that he is far better known in these wild regions. Did you ever hear of Rebel George?"

"He saved the train from being wrecked—he was with us when you attacked the coach—you murdered him—"

The stumpy arm was raised, and Elephant Tom uttered a low, taunting laugh that cut the speaker short.

"Will you never comprehend the truth, Horatio Adair? Will nothing serve to open your eyes, short of ocular demonstration? Then rub the cobwebs out of your peepers, and—behold!"

As he uttered the last words, Elephant Tom shook the slouched hat from his head, the stumpy arms went up behind his back, and fumbling there for a few moments, the ingenious mask was split up the back of the skull,

falling forward upon the breast of its wearer, revealing the darkly handsome countenance of Rebel George Bretto!

A gasping cry parted the ashen lips of the captive, but not a word escaped him. His amazement was too profound for articulate expression.

One moment thus, then, with a short laugh that was muffled and rendered hollow by the mask, Elephant Tom drew the covering to his head once more into place, donned his hat, and again supported his elbows upon his knees as he leered into the white, stupefied face of the speculator.

"A more obstinate case of blind stupidity, I never encountered in the whole course of my practical experience!" he exclaimed, with a short, explosive laugh that betrayed more of irritation than of merriment. "Even yet you are doubting—doubting the evidence of your own eyesight!"

"You killed him—I saw you—saw you drag his corpse to the edge of the gulch, and tumble it down!" muttered Horatio Adair, his fishy eyes starting almost out of their sockets as they stared incredulously into that ugly mask.

"Look here, my good fellow," added Elephant Tom, sharply. "I thought a word and a peep under the curtain would set all your doubts at rest, so that you and I could talk business, with a clear and perfect understanding between us; but it appears that I overrated your brain powers. I'll make one more effort to brush the cobwebs from your brain. If that ends in failure, I'll go ahead with the game, and let you play your cards blindfolded."

"I sent that dispatch to you, my main purpose being to lure you into my power, out here where I could work my sweet will without fear of outside interference. Thanks to my confederate on the train with you, I knew to a certainty which one you honored with your presence, and made my arrangements accordingly."

"I took the operator at Florida Station prisoner, and cut the wires. As I was destroying his instruments, he attempted to escape, and was killed in consequence. I knew that there was little likelihood of the train's stopping at the station, for passengers were rare, and no train orders necessary, but to stave off any accidental discovery, I caused the poor devil to be rigged up behind the counter, as you saw him."

"I left a guard in hiding with orders, then took the rest of my men on to the crossing over the Rio Florida. A lot of giant powder was placed where it would do the most good, and a short fuse attached, so that the bridge could be blown up at a moment's notice. But that would never have been done had I failed to stop the train in time."

"That makes you start, but it is nothing save the naked truth. I did give the alarm, not as Elephant Tom, but as Rebel George Bretto, well known to the train-men. All that firing and bloody-thunder business was clear moonshine—"

"But the dead men?" stammered Adair bewilderedly.

"I forgot them," laughed Elephant Tom, carelessly. "They were only unlucky idiots who stuck their noses into what did not concern them and got laid out cold. They had been fishing, and, evidently with the intention of boarding the train at Florida station, ran right into us, before either side scented trouble. They saw too much, and went the way of all flesh, of course. Since they were on our hands we made the most of them, and after blacking their faces assigned them a part in the play, to make it all the more real and thrilling, you see."

Horatio Adair shuddered, averting his eyes, his blood curdling in his veins as he listened to that devilish candor.

"At the proper moment I made my rush, and the boys opened on me with blank cartridges. I answered their fire, but took precious good care not to break flesh. I succeeded in checking the train, and seeing this my men touched off the giant powder and sent the bridge to glory, then placed the cold meat in position and took to cover, leaving the rest to me."

"How I played my part you are well aware. I knew that you would be eager to get on to Durango, and as my confederate pointed out your secretary I dropped the bait in his way, to have it swallowed quite as greedily as I anticipated."

"You know what followed. As soon as it was settled that you were to hear me company my fellow hastened by a short cut to notify the rest of the gang and assume the guise of Elephant Tom. The man who drove the coach was not in the secret, and if he had acted with common prudence I would not have harmed a hair of the poor devil's head. But he tried to make a break for it when he thought we were all busy, and I was playing for too long stakes to hesitate or throw away a single chance; so I dropped him with a blue whistler."

"You saw Rebel George shoot at Elephant Tom straight enough, and with lead, too; but you did not know that his bullet was flattened upon a steel breast-plate. You saw him turn as though to help your secretary, but in reality to

give the bold road-agent a better chance to overpower him. You saw him dragged out of the coach, and believed you saw Elephant Tom shatter his skull with his heavy pistol; instead of that, he only pounded the ground, and when poor Rebel George was dropped into the gulch, it was to land on his feet and skurry off at full speed to reach this spot ahead of the cavalcade. This he accomplished, thanks to a good horse which was awaiting him, and while you were stopped at the entrance, the two men changed identity, and Rebel George became Elephant Tom."

Breathless from his rapid speaking, the outlaw paused to catch his breath, while a groan of conviction broke from the thin lips of the speculator lying bound and helpless before him. He could no longer doubt. The whole was made so clear; every misty point was so fully explained, all seeming discrepancies were so admirably reconciled, that he wondered at his having so long remained in the dark.

Elephant Tom laughed as he heard that lugubrious sound.

"You begin to see the bottom at last! Well, it is time. I have wasted an hour, where a minute should have sufficed to arrive at a perfect understanding.

"You know who I am now. You remember the past, when you robbed me of more than wealth—when you branded me as a felon, and made me an outcast among my fellows. You know, too, that you are wholly at my mercy. That if I choose I can kill, torture you, make you suffer at least a tithe of the agonies I suffered while mentally rotting in that prison cell.

"All this I may do if you are obstinate; but first I mean to wring your heart in its tenderest point—to wrest from you a portion of the gold you so entirely worship. That first; the other can wait another opportunity."

Horatio Adair set his teeth together with a sharp click. A dogged light came into his eyes, an ugly look into his face.

Elephant Tom laughed bitterly as he noted this.

"Bah! old fool. Do you think for a moment to defy me? I know how you idolize your ill-gotten gold, but at the same time do you forget that I hold your beautiful daughter at my sweet mercy? That I can set her free or hold her captive? If I say the word, her fate will be worse than death. Or—ay! why not? She is lovely as a child's dream of heaven. Already I can fancy myself deeply in love with the angelic creature!"

"Devil!" gasped Adair, the big veins starting out on his crimsoned temples. "Dare to injure her, even in thought—"

"My dear fellow," smoothly interrupted the road agent, "you do me injustice. Actually, I mean to make her my wife—"

"She would die first."

"Take care that a worse fate than marrying Elephant Tom does not overtake her then," significantly added the outlaw. "I'm only half in love with the dainty bit o' dry goods; yet, if you pay the ransom I demand, and remove the temptation from my sight without delay, it may never grow stronger."

"What amount do you demand?" hesitated Adair.

"I'll strike you lightly for this time, and make it up when we chance to come together again," laughed Elephant Tom. "Really I am almost ashamed to mention the sum, it is such a small portion of what is really owing me, and a mere flea-bite to a man of your enormous wealth—\$50,000 in hard cash."

"I'll die first!" snarled Adair, furiously.

"You certainly will die if you refuse to pay that trifling sum, and still worse will come to your daughter. I'm in sober earnest now. Either consent to pay me that amount in lawful coin, or I'll torture you until you pray for death as a welcome release from your agonies."

Hot and venomous came the words, and from the depths of his mask the dark eyes of Elephant Tom glittered like those of a threatening serpent.

Horatio Adair caught that glare and shuddered, despite the mad rage with which he was almost suffocated. It told him how little mercy he had to expect at those hands, and he was so utterly, helplessly in his power.

"Give me half an hour to make up my mind," he muttered huskily, great drops of cold sweat starting out on his brow.

"Good enough! In half an hour I'll call for an answer," and rising to his feet, Elephant Tom waddled away.

CHAPTER XI.

A HOLY PICNIC FOR TOMPOLEON.

With hurried steps, Dirigo Branscombe flung up his revolver and fired one shot at the burglar who had so mercilessly exposed his frailty of that day, and without cry or moan, Tompoleon Tarbox fell to the ground with the limp, lifeless appearance of one shot through brain or heart.

One breath of startled indecision, then, as though fearing further firing, Wes. Hardcastle and those who had professed themselves against lynch-law, separated and fell back, making no

effort to avenge the fall of the man whom but a few seconds before they had sworn to defend with their own lives.

So, too, with the division which had supported the speculator; at the crack of his pistol, they scattered, dodging, ducking, thinking more of preserving their own skins intact than of perforating others', even Elias Aiken abruptly retreating and leaving his infuriated partner alone.

Little Dirigo Branscombe cared for that, just then. He saw his enemy fall to the ground at his shot, and believed that he had forever stilled a most dangerous tongue. As for any punishment to follow his treacherous deed, that gave him little trouble. If not chief of Durango, his wealth and responsible position there raised him far above all such peril.

"Slow and easy, gentlemen!" rung out his voice, clear and warningly, as he glanced swiftly around over the shrinking, crouching forms, a revolver butt clasped in each hand. "I don't want to hurt any one of you, but if you crowd me too close, you'll be mighty apt to hear something drop, for keeps! This quarrel rests between that long-legged liar and myself."

A brief silence, then the stern voice of Hardcastle said:

"It was a cowardly trick you played, an' I don't keer a cuss who hears me say so! To shoot a pore devil down who wasn't lookin' or thinkin' o' nothin' o' the sort—"

"Who set you up as my judge, Wes. Hardcastle?" sharply interrupted Branscombe.

"Bein' a white man gives me some right to use my tongue."

"But not to abuse it," was the swift retort. "I don't care about being drawn into any row with you. You're an honest, well-meaning fellow, though you did suffer that ruffian to bamboozle you with his nimble tongue and audacious lies—for lies they were, as I will prove to you one and all."

"I never lay eyes on the rascal before this evening, and so far from plotting his death, I never knew that the world contained a being of his description. While, as far as his utterly ridiculous tale of my insulting Miss Bretto is concerned, one word will prove to you the rank falsity of such a monstrous charge."

"Miss Bretto is my betrothed, and will become my wife inside of the month. Now, I ask you, as men of common-sense, is it at all likely that I would abuse her, as he declared?"

Dirigo Branscombe paused in his hasty speech for an answer, and it came right speedily, though not exactly in the shape he anticipated.

"Liar!" cried a clear, distinct voice, coming from some point above the startled crowd. "Cowardly villain and traducer! Rather than mate with you, Naomi Bretto would espouse the arch fiend himself!"

A grating curse from the lips of Dirigo Branscombe; a wondering murmur from the startled crowd, as all eyes were raised toward the spot from whence floated those sharp, scornful words, to behold—

A trim, graceful form drawn erect upon the point of a rock which projected out beyond the line of the mesa, face and figure clearly revealed by the bright moonlight, one hand raised as though calling Heaven to testify to the truth of her words, the other pointing down at the shrinking, cowering shape of Dirigo Branscombe.

One and all of those present recognized the speaker, for Naomi Bretto was well nigh idolized by the rough inhabitants of Durango, and not one of them all doubted the truth of her words when she so positively accused Foxy Branscombe.

"Gentlemen," continued the maiden, her voice ringing with the accents of truth, pure and simple. "What that audacious scoundrel so impudently denied, is all true. He did insult me, when he found me alone and unprotected. God alone knows what would have been my fate had not an honest man come to my assistance and punished that dirty cur as he so richly deserved, by slapping his face, making him beg my pardon on his knees, and then kicking him out of the house."

"His punishment would have been even more severe had I not interfered to save his worthless life. Not through any regard for the craven brute, but that he might be called to account by a man whom you all know—whom he basely slandered before my face—my father, George Bretto."

"Now, there is still another black account against him. I saw how cravenly he shot down that poor fellow—the honest man who rescued a poor girl from those degrading clutches—and I swear that George Bretto shall call him to a bitter account for that in addition—"

While Naomi was speaking, a slight cloud sailed across the face of the moon, veiling her light and casting the level below into gloom. Then the light returned, and a sharp cry of wonder cut her speech short.

An agile form leaped upon Dirigo Branscombe, from behind, a strong hand closing upon his throat, a nimble foot kicking both feet from under him, when a sudden wrench and twist laid him flat upon his back, both pistols flying

from his hands in the sharp and complete surprise.

"Heap o' thanks to ye, honey-love, fer yer kind 'tentions, but all the same, I sorter reckon ole Tompoleon kin squar' all sech debts as these, without callin' in his neighbors to lend a han'. Lay still, ye squarmin' hop-toad, 'less ye want me fer to drive ye clean through the airth to China-land!" and the horsehide boot pressed still more heavily upon the chest of the fallen man.

"Now you, pritty-by-night, take a ole man's 'vice, an' go back home as quick as you kin, an' stay ther ontel your pap comes home. Tell him what ole Tompoleon said, an' you won't be runnin' no resk o' tellin' a lie, ef you'll jest swar that it's the solid truth from a to ampersand!"

"Don't kill the cur—though he richly deserves the worst punishment that mortal ingenuity can invent—spare him for my father!" earnestly cried Naomi.

"Your word is law an' gospel to the ole man, sugar-lump. Now won't ee go? Ef you should ketch cold 'long o' my 'count, hope to die ef I don't kick my brains out with the fust mule I kin steal or lorry—I jest will, honey-bird!"

With a parting wave of her hand, Naomi Bretto stepped backward from the point of rock, and vanished from view.

Snarling, foaming at the mouth, Dirigo Branscombe struggled furiously to free himself, and Tompoleon abruptly removed his foot, stooping and grasping the speculator by the throat before he could arise, lifting him from the ground and holding him at arm's length despite his writhing and twisting.

"Kick an' squarm all ye like, ole p'izen!" he laughed, emphasizing each word with a shake. "It's a man that's got hold o' ye now, an' not a ghost; though that ain't your fault, fer ef I hed bin jest the shadder of a second slower in takin' a tumble, you'd 'a' drilled my cabeza, sure, 'stead o' jest rakin' up a little bark onto the top o' my knowledge-box. Kick an' squamble—look out you!"

From jeering to menace his voice swiftly passed, and Tompoleon clapped the muzzle of a revolver to the head of the helpless speculator, as he glared savagely upon Elias Aiken.

"Jest try it on, ef you want a vacancy in the firm, ole stick-in-the-mud! I've tuck one shot without answerin' it, but ef another comes, it'll find me a-spittin' back lead fer all that's out—an' the fust pill will physic this sweet-scented specimen o' humanity so powerful bad that he won't sarve fer a parlor ornament never no more ag'in—mind that!"

Elias Aiken had drawn and half-leveled a revolver, with the intention of freeing his partner by a snap-shot, but now he shrunk back, the weapon falling to his side, his face pale and his voice shaky as he uttered:

"Let him go, then. You have no right to treat him so."

"Waal, durned ef you hain't got the cheek of a Gover'ment mule! Talk 'bout surance agents an' book pirates! Go 'way, critters! you ain't got no aige onto him—not much!"

"I hain't got no right—you hearn him, gents?" appealing to the amused crowd, all of whom had scattered so that they were out of the direct line of fire, should the band begin to play, as they momentarily expected would be the case. "I hain't got no right—when you all hearn what that precious little drop o' honey-dew from heaven up thar said a bit back?"

"Waal, mebbe I hain't. But all the same, I'm goin' to take a right jest this fur—I goin' to give the toes o' my boots a lightnin' polish, usin' the seat o' Foxy Branscombe's broadcloth britches as brush an' blackin'. Or, ef that language is too hefty fer your undercomstandin', the ole man is gwine to kick this b'iled-down essence o' nat'ral cussedness, clean through the town—so help me John Hennyery!"

Beyond the shadow of a doubt Tompoleon Tarbox meant every word that he uttered, and was deliberately preparing to put his threat into execution when there arose an ominous mutter from that portion of the crowd which had supported the speculator from the first.

"Give the man a show!" cried one loud voice. "That's no way to treat a dog, let alone a gentleman."

"No kicking. If you want satisfaction fight him fair."

"Turn him loose, or we will!" added still another voice, even more threateningly than the others.

Tompoleon Tarbox glared savagely around at the speakers, exceedingly loth to give over his intention, but he was no fool, and saw that the tide which had so suddenly turned in his favor was veering around again quite as rapidly, and with a short, hard laugh, he gave Foxy Branscombe a parting shake, then flung him away so forcibly that the speculator reeled and fell in a heap at the feet of his partner in business.

"Hev it your own way, gents, ef you think ye kin git any more sugar out o' the cornstalk thusly. The ole man's the most 'commodatin' cuss you ever stumbled over on a dark night, an' long's he kin make fun fer the fambly, he don't keer a continental copper whether it's in Dutch, heathen Chinees or Choctaw. But at the same time you don't want to make no mistake,

“Ef you take down your little spellin’ book you’ll see that *fun* is the fust three ‘nitals o’ *funeral*. You can’t hev a genuine funeral ‘bout a corpus, no more’n you kin spell the same without fust gittin’ *fun*. I’m jst runnin’ over with fun, but I’ve got too many ‘portant ‘gagements on hand to play the stifle. In the everlastin’ words o’ the ‘mortal poie:

“‘Did you ever see the devil.
With his wooden leg an’ shovel,
Diggin’ up his ‘taters
With his tail curled up?’

“Ef you ever did, then you see a instance o’ pure business from the word git-up, but which ain’t a pinch o’ powder in a bushel bum-shell ‘longside o’ me when I’ve got business waitin’ ahead, an’ a snag or sawyer gits in my way. Somethin’ hes got to split wide open, an’ I’m bettin’ my last shekel it won’t be your Uncle Fuller, either, an’ thar ye got it!”

“Lend me a barker, some o’ you!” snarled Branscombe, staggering to his feet and eagerly stretching out one hand toward his partner, while his bloodshot eyes glared venomously at the athlete who had handled him so unceremoniously. “I’ll kill the bragging devil, though he comes straight from Tophet!”

“Don’t be hard-hearted, gents, an’ deny a pore critter his last dyin’ ax-ye-fer-somethin’,” laughed Tompoleon. “Some o’ you fellers that was slingin’ your clappers ‘round so mighty loose jest now, chuck a battery or two in his hooks, an’ then prop him up abind, so he don’t run away afore he smells the powder burnin’. Thar’s heaps o’ fun layin’ ‘round loose, an’ you mought as well hev a chunk as not.”

“I protest, gentlemen!” cried Elias Aiken, reaching the side of his partner and placing a pistol in his hand, but at the same time restraining him from firing or rushing upon his cool adversary. “That bully has shaken and flung my mate around so that he is really in no fit condition to fight a duel, much less in the night, as now.”

“Then what on airth is the crazy critter howlin’ after be-luddy ge-ore fer?” demanded Tompoleon, indignantly.

“I’ll have it, too, curse you!” snarled Branscombe, making a sudden effort to free himself from the firm grasp of his partner. “Let up, Aiken—curse it, man, let up! I tell you I’ll kill him, or he’ll kill me, before we leave this spot!”

“Rub him down with a icicle, somebody, to cool off his legs so they won’t melt from onder him when ye set him up afore a man. Run a ramrod down his back an’ stick it in the ground, hitch him fast, chuck a Gatling or two in his mud hooks, an’ see how p’izen slick he kin shoot a hole clean through the atmospheric all ‘round the ole man. Dollars to cents he cain’t draw the ruby, an’ double the odds that I make him howl wuss then a bullfoundland pup with a elephunt stompin’ onto his tail!”

“Gentlemen, once more I appeal to you, as white citizens who have, or *should* have, some respect fer thar town, even ef they hain’t got none fer themselves,” cried Harcastle, stepping between the enemies. “If Mr. Branscombe insists on fighting, after the very just an’ wise remark o’ his pardner, why, as the least disgrace to our town, let’s hev it done up ‘cordin’ to rule, not slap-dash an’ Injun fashion, whar them as ain’t got a durned mite o’ intrust into the muss is the very ones most apt to git physicked.”

“Listen to reason, Branscombe—”

“When I’ve got even with that devil—not before!” the infuriated speculator snarled, foam dropping from his yellow teeth, his wolfish eyes glaring redly.

“All right!” growled Aiken, in utter disgust. “If you *will* be an infernal fool, I can’t help it. It would serve you no more’n right, if I were to let you go blindfold; but for old times’ sake, I’ll see that you have all the show possible.”

“All right here, too, gents,” cried Tompoleon, all traces of mockery vanishing as though by magic. “I place myself in your han’s, pard Harcastle. All I ax is fair play. Give the gents the choice o’ weepins, the distance they like best, the word an’ all other points they kin ax. Ef you’re satisfied, the ole man ain’t a-goin’ to kick.”

Now that he saw a chance of getting even, Foxy Branscombe calmed down, and while Elias Aiken and Wesley Harcastle consulted together, he stood alone in sullen quietude.

Though so cool and indifferent to all outward seeming, Tompoleon Tarbox kept a close watch upon his treacherous adversary, ready to foil and punish any further attempt upon his life; but this precaution proved unnecessary. Branscombe had time to cool down a little, and he was smart enough to realize that another action like that which had so nearly ended in murder, would turn the tide of popular opinion wholly against him, just when he most required its support.

But few words were wasted between Aiken and Harcastle, and the last named returned to the side of his principal.

“They wouldn’t listen to no puttin’ it on fer daylight, an’ so you’re to meet him to oncet,” he hurriedly explained.

The old, reckless tone and air came back to

Tompoleon, and with a careless laugh, he responded:

“Don’t make a diff o’ bitterness to this ole coot. Bless ye, honey, I was born in the dark, an’ tuck lessons o’ shootin’ from an owl. I kin thread a needle at sixty rod, every time, an’ the darker the dark, so much the better.”

“Glad to hear ye say so,” dryly, “fer he ain’t no slouch when it comes to ‘ministerin’ blue pills through a steel tube like these. You don’t want to throw away no chainces, I tell ye, ‘less ye got mighty pressin’ business over the range.”

“Ef he gits a chaince to break my hide, I’ll quit shootin’ an’ go to poundin’ texts fer a livin’. I’m open to take evens that I wing him the fust shot, an’ ef that don’t sicken him fer this once, at the next I’ll clap my seal onto him so he’ll never run the resk o’ bein’ taken up as a Maverick.”

“Ef you kin sling lead one-hafe as peert as you sling wind, I wouldn’t give much fer his show,” laughed Harcastle, but with plainly increasing doubts. “You don’t look like a critter to show the white feather when it comes to a pinch; but talkin’ ain’t doin’, by a heap plenty, an’ ef you should feel like takin’ a scramble to git out, jest stiffen your backbone by ‘memberin’ that you’ve got me mixed up in the job, an’ I ain’t a goin’ to hev dirt throwed onto me by t’other side, ef I hev to plug you my own self!”

“Jest slam ‘er clean through the ole man when you see him turn tail, pard,” chuckled Tompoleon. “I’d like fer ye to hev your fun mighty well, but I reckon you’ll hev to wait fer the second table afore you gits it. I don’t advertise to be a ‘tarnal hog, but when I gits hold of a holy picnic like this, I hangs onto it like a tappin’ snorkle to a nigger’s toe, an’ never lets loose until it thunders!”

“Durned ef I know how to take ye!” muttered the other. “Never mind. Let’s git down to business, or t’other side’ll think I’m bevin’ to stiffen your backbone afore gittin’ you to toe the scratch.”

Briefly Harcastle made known the conditions as arranged between him and Elias Aiken. The weapons used were to be revolvers, a brace to each man. The duelists were to be stationed fifty yards apart, with their backs turned toward each other until the signal was given, when they were to wheel and fire at will, advancing or retreating, using any tactics they thought proper, or most likely to advantage their cause.

“It’s a p’izen bloody way o’ fightin’,” muttered Harcastle, as he filled the revolvers which he had taken from his principal with fresh cartridges; “but Foxy Branscombe wouldn’t hear fo nothin’ quieter. He says that one or the other o’ you two won’t leave the ground alive an’ kickin’.”

“It’ll be the other, then,” laughed Tompoleon. “I’m too ram-jammed full o’ business fer to go off the books yit awhile, at his say-so!”

“Come!” impatiently cried Aiken. “Are you going to keep us here until midnight? If your man is weakening, say so, and we’ll see if we can’t bring him to the sticking place with a liberal dose of boot-leather.”

“All-sot, whenever you be, pussy!” cried Tompoleon. “Cocked an’ primed an’ triggers sprung. Stick up your target, an’ ef I don’t show ye some fun, I’ll eat my ole hat!”

There was no further delay. The fifty paces were measured off, and the two men took their positions. The spectators divided into two parties, separating so as to give the duelists ample room for wild shooting; and then came a breathless silence as all waited for the word which was to turn loose the dogs of war.

It came promptly, and at the word, both men wheeled and confronted each other; but there all similitude ceased.

Tompoleon stood like a rock, with revolver cocked and leveled in his right hand, the left hanging by his side, while Foxy Branscombe darted forward at full speed, leaping swiftly from side to side, evidently bent on coming to close quarters before wasting lead.

Half the distance was covered, when he suddenly paused, throwing out his right arm; but before he could pull trigger, much less secure an aim, Tarbox fired, and with a snarling cry, Branscombe dropped his weapon, his arm hanging useless.

“Look out, clumsy!” cried Tompoleon, with a mocking laugh. “You dropped your six. Pick it up an’ try again, won’t ye?”

Stung with pain, wild with fury, Branscombe appeared to forget that he had another weapon, and stooped to pick up the pistol, as he did so exposing his profile in the moonlight.

Swift as thought came a second report, and as the form of the speculator sprung back and erect, Tarbox yelled:

“Look out fer your nozzle, ole boss! Didn’t I tell ye! Durn sech fool! keerness, anyhow, I say! Somebody len’ him the loan of a nose-wipe, fer he needs it, bad!”

One instant Dirigo Branscombe stood erect in the moonlight, and all could see the blood streaming from his face.

The marvelously-aimed bullet had fairly carried away the point of his nose, horribly mutilating him and marking him for life!

CHAPTER XII.

A LOVER ON THE TRAIL.

It will be remembered that while playing a manly part in defending the coach against the road-agents and depending on Rebel George to keep the other side of the vehicle clear, Albert Matney, the confidential secretary of Horatio Adair, was hurled through the yielding door by the impetuous attack of Elephant Tom, whose heavy revolver-butt descended upon his head with deadly force.

Stunned by the blow and fall combined, the luckless secretary was not conscious of the fact that Elephant Tom, enraged by the unexpected resistance and the fall of two of his men, scrambled to his feet and discharged one shot, point-blank, at the figure lying only a few feet away.

At such close quarters it seemed a literal impossibility for the road-agent to miss his mark; yet such actually happened; so narrowly, however, that Elephant Tom could have sworn stoutly that his lead had bored the skull of the secretary, as contemplated.

Instead, the bullet barely grazed Matney’s temple, striking in a little hollow of the rock upon which he lay with force enough to batter the lead to bits and splinter the stone, casting the minute particles with such severity into the cheek and side of Matney’s head that the latter was lifted a foot or more from the ground, partly by the force of the novel blast, but more through the mechanical shrinking of his body from pain, even though that pain was not realized by his benumbed brain.

In the moonlight Elephant Tom could see the blood covering the poor devil’s face, and naturally enough gave him not a second thought, little thinking that he was doomed to be given serious trouble by that same “corpse” before the ending of that eventful night.

Albert Matney was tumbled into the shallow gulch together with the carcasses of the murdered driver and the two slain outlaws. A faint groan of pain escaped his lips as he fell heavily, but most fortunately this feeble token of returning consciousness was not noticed by the road-agents, who were nimbly carrying out the instructions of their chief, and hence it was that Albert Matney, dizzy-headed, faint, covered with mingled blood and dirt, staggered to his feet in time to overhear the words which Elephant Tom addressed to his captives before setting out with them on that swift night-ride.

No more powerful restorative could have been applied. All traces of bodily weakness vanished like magic as the young man listened. His strong teeth grated together, and his eyes, no longer concealed by the smoked glasses, glowed with a dangerous fire.

The swift glance which he cast around him showed to Matney the three corpses, and with that burning lust for revenge upon the ruffian whose cold, mocking tones even then rung in his ears, he hastily searched the bodies for weapons, only to be disappointed. The road-agents had most thoroughly performed their work, even taking away with them the masks and cowls which their fellows had worn.

A breath of baffled fury; then Matney picked up a couple of stones as a forlorn hope of obtaining more effective arms, and glanced around him for some method of leaving the gulch without being prematurely discovered by the enemy.

Luckily for him, at that moment Elephant Tom gave the word for traveling, and the sharp ringing of iron-shod hoofs on the flinty trail gave Albert Matney warning that he had no time to lose if he hoped to aid the maiden whom he so passionately loved, and dropping the now useless stones, he grasped the nearest points of rock and dragged himself up to the road, listening for a moment with bended ear, then striking boldly along the trail of the outlaws.

For a more complete understanding of what follows, a few remarks by way of explanation will not come amiss.

Though at present acting as confidential secretary to Horatio Adair, Albert Matney—which name will serve as well as another for the present—had filled that position for barely one year.

A graduate of a prominent Eastern college, he had drifted West, and having some capital to start in life with, finally invested it in a cattle ranch. His business prospered, and he was in a fair way of growing to become a cattle-king, but he could not long confine himself to routine work, and turning all over to a superintendent, he made Denver his head quarters, plunging over head and ears into dissipation, casting his gold to the winds, gaining a reputation for being the wildest of all wild sports; drinking, gaming, fighting, without pause or cessation, until a warning message from his man of business told him that supplies were running short.

As suddenly as he had flashed upon the fast world of the Queen of the Prairies, just so abruptly did the dashing sport vanish, to be heard of no more until nearly two years had elapsed, when he returned and took up the dropped thread of dissipation as though only a night had intervened.

This time his career was very brief, though cut short by a far different motive. He met

Maura Adair, and fell over head and ears in love with her at first sight. Handsome, graceful, polite, a gentleman despite his wildness, little wonder that Maura began to look upon him with some interest, when the alarm was taken by Horatio Adair, who loved his gold too well to run even a chance of having it dissipated by this reformed rake, in the character of his daughter's husband.

His suspicions were awakened by his secretary, who had covert hopes of one day succeeding to his master's business by winning the hand of his heiress, and after some painful scenes between the parties most intimately concerned, the dangerous acquaintance was broken off, as Adair fondly imagined, forever.

A night or two later the secretary was carried home from a gambling-hall, covered with weals from top to toe, the result of a merciless cowhiding at the hands of the dashing sport. Warned that an unnecessary delay in resigning his position and levitating to more congenial climes would result in another dose of the same medicine, Horatio Adair was suddenly left without a secretary.

An old and trusted business friend heard of his loss, and highly recommended one Albert Matney, the son of a very dear friend back East, who was fully qualified for the position, besides coming from rich and high stock.

His long locks shorn close, his forked beard and drooping mustaches sacrificed by the barber, a pair of smoked-glass spectacles hiding his lustrous eyes, the candidate met Adair without awaking the ghost of a suspicion, and after a close and searching examination was given the situation.

Very circumspectly did the young man play his part, maintaining his disguise even while alone in company with Maura, until he felt sure that she would not betray him or be very grievously shocked by his deception. Nor was he in error. The maiden had learned to love him for himself, or rather for the poor secretary he seemed, and when the trio took the train for Durango, called there by the forged telegram, the young people were pledged to each other, though as yet Horatio Adair was ignorant of the fact.

Guided by the clattering of hoofs, Albert Matney quickly found the trail, and dogged the outlaws as closely as the nature of the ground they traversed would permit. His wounds were forgotten. His trained muscles enabled him to keep within earshot of the riders throughout all that night-ride, and when Elephant Tom called a halt at the mouth of the secret tunnel, Matney was only a few rods behind them, closely watching their every movement.

From their leaving their horses, he felt convinced that the outlaws had reached their present stopping-place, and as he lay in ambush a little longer, this belief became a certainty.

The horses were led away and lariatied where they could graze or crop the bush-tops, a couple of men acting as guard over them, while a third took up his station close to the mass of foliage into which the spy had seen Elephant Tom with the captives, vanish only a few minutes earlier. The remainder of the force also passed into the bushes, and were seen no more.

"It's the entrance to a cave, no doubt," muttered Matney below his breath, as he closely scanned the rocks which rose abruptly behind the leafy screen. "No matter; were it the very portals to Hades, I'm going in there, unless Elephant Tom brings out his prisoners within an hour—that's sworn to!"

Cautiously, taking advantage of every bit of available cover, like one who fully realizes the penalty of a false step, Matney stole around to where he could overlook the two horse guards, finally spying them lying lazily upon the ground, smoking their pipes, drowsily talking together. And even as he watched, he heard one, with a yawning oath, mutter:

"It's all deuced nonsense, keeping us on guard here! You can do as you please, old coon, but I'm going to have a snooze, if it breaks the bank—you hear me spout!"

"Bet ye a dollar I gits thar fust!" grunted his comrade, his voice sounding even more somnolent, and being each of the same mind, the horse-guards emptied their pipes and lay down "spoon-fashion," little recking of danger.

Matney watched them closely for a few minutes, until he could plainly distinguish their commingling snores, giving ample evidence of the soundness of their slumbers. Wistfully he eyed the weapons they bore, for full possession of which he would freely have bartered all his nattle, but, though the temptation was strong indeed, he restrained himself.

"I couldn't steal them away without waking them. It would be impossible to stun or kill one without arousing the other, and though I think I could get away with the twain, easy enough, they might make enough noise to alarm the other guard—Ha! I'll take him!"

With renewed hope burning in his breast, Matney turned and stole away from the spot, eager, yet not neglecting a single precaution. It was a bold and desperate scheme which he had so suddenly formed, but one which he felt could be carried out with at least a possibility

of success crowning his efforts; and this hope grew into conviction as he regained a position from whence he could peer out upon the sentinel stationed before what the young man believed was the underground retreat of Elephant Tom and his marauding gang.

The outlaw had altered his position a little while Matney was spying on the horse-guards, and now stood out in the level to the left of the leafy screen, where a scrubby tree, which started from a ledge of rock several yards higher than his head, cast its shadow down upon him. He was leaning his shoulders against the face of the rock, smoking a pipe as he stood thus, apparently on the keen lookout.

Before him and to either side, stretched a moonlighted space, across which not even a rat could have passed without being discovered, unless the sentinel was sleeping on his post. That this was not the case, Matney knew too well, as he could distinguish the regular, faint glow of the fire in the pipe-bowl as the outlaw inhaled the grateful vapor. Yet a stern smile curled his lip and the dangerous fire deepened in his dark, unmasked eyes as he slowly, stealthily withdrew from the position he had occupied while making his observations.

Crawling backward until beyond all danger of his motions attracting the attention of the sentinel, Matney closely scanned the face of the rock wall for a few moments, then began climbing up to where a narrow ledge wound round the ragged cliff.

Gaining this, Matney lay flat on his stomach, and drew himself along foot by foot, cresting his head occasionally to take a peep at the sentinel whose position he could distinguish, though his form itself was now invisible.

Slowly, choking down his impatience whenever it urged him to proceed more swiftly at the expense of prudence, the young man crawled on and on, until at length he secured a position almost immediately above where the sentry stood smoking, leaning back against the rock, never suspecting how low the sands of his life were running.

For a brief space, Albert Matney lay motionless on his stomach, stilling his breath to listen; then, as not a sound came to his ears from below, he slowly raised to his knees, and stealthily moving his head forward, stole a swift glance at his enemy below.

That one glimpse was sufficient. He saw that the road-agent was totally unsuspecting of danger, and that he had not materially altered his position since being marked by means of the tree which overhung him.

From among the fragments of rock with which the ledge was plentifully strewn, Matney selected one of probably half a hundred weight, and with this poised above his head, he arose and bent over the escarpment.

Only one instant to steady his aim—then the heavy mass was hurled downward with deadly force.

Matney saw it strike true to his aim—saw the outlaw fall in a heap before the terrible shock; and then he leaped from the ledge and fastened his sinewy fingers around the throat of the luckless wretch.

This precaution proved needless, however. The rock had faithfully performed the work intended, and the sentinel, with crushed and shattered skull, was off duty forever.

"It looks hard," muttered the scout, as his nimble fingers secured the pistol-belt and its weapons, "but it only saves the wretch from the hangman's noose, to which end he must surely have come—so what's the odds?"

Buckling the belt around his waist, Matney next removed the black hood and mask from the head of the outlaw, wringing out the warm blood which was rapidly saturating them, as well as he could, then donning them himself. To still further complete his disguise, he took off his coat and replaced it with the coarse hunting-shirt worn by the dead man, buttoning this high to the neck to hide his linen.

Assuring himself that his blood-purchased pistols were in serviceable condition, and fully supplied with cartridges, Matney glided forward, and, parting the bushes at the point where he had watched Elephant Tom disappear with his captives, followed that example without a moment's hesitation.

A short breath of amazement escaped his lips as he saw that, instead of the cavern which he looked for, a lovely miniature valley was open before him, dimly lighted up by the red glow of fires, as well as the mellow light of the moon.

Though his disguise was so complete, he did not feel like courting observation, and without actually skulking, kept well among the shadows as he slowly advanced, using his ears as well as his eyesight.

It was the former that soon led to the discovery he so ardently longed to make, for he caught the sounds of human voices talking not many rods distant from the position he then occupied, and moving forward, soon came to a clump of dense undergrowth, through which he peered, to behold the bowed form of his loved one seated upon the grass not far from a little fire, with a short, broad figure standing before her.

The white teeth of the scout came together

with an ominous click as he recognized the form of Elephant Tom, and instinctively his right hand sought the butt of a revolver.

But almost as quickly his common-sense returned to him, and the weapon remained in its scabbard. To burn powder then and there would prove fatal to his hopes of rescuing Maura Adair from that merciless grip. It would bring all the gang upon his shoulders, and though the victory might cost them dearly, force of numbers would surely prevail in the end.

So, though his hands clinched until the nails ate into the flesh, and his muscles quivered with an intense longing to grapple with and crush the dastard who spoke so coolly, so insultingly, Matney held his passions in check for the time.

It was shortly after Elephant Tom, in accordance with the request of Horatio Adair that he be given half an hour for deliberation before giving his ultimatum, had parted from the speculator and paid Maura a visit.

"In one word, my beauty," the road-agent was saying, "I have taken too much trouble not to get ample reward. I have racked my brain until it fairly aches, shaping this plan and carrying out its complicated details. Not a cent less than fifty thousand will repay me—nor would that sum, if I hadn't other strings in my bow."

"If the old man sells out, like a sensible cuss, we'll shake hands and call it even—until I get another chance to take a whack at his money-bags. If not—if he still clings to his dust—well, I'll be candid with you, little one."

"Since I first beheld you, and noted your beauty, I've been resisting a powerful temptation to claim more than dust. It would not be hard for me to fall over head and ears in love with you—not nearly so hard as to refrain from so doing—and in the end I would be the winner by yielding, too, since everybody knows that the old man is worth a million, and that you are his sole heiress. By wedding you—"

"I rather die a thousand deaths!" indignantly cried Maura, lifting her head, hot scorn drying the pearly tears in her flashing eyes. "How dare you so insult me?"

Elephant Tom laughed, coldly, sneeringly, then said:

"It's easier to say what I dare not than what I dare, my bird of Paradise, as you may have the opportunity of learning, ere long, if the old man does not come down with his dust, without any more nonsense. As for your dying, I'll take care for that, unless you choose to die of love for yours truly—far stranger things have happened!"

Never before in his life did Elephant Tom stand so near death's portals as while uttering those words. A revolver in the hand of one who felt that he could tear the insulting ruffian limb from limb kept him covered, and only the knowledge that a shot would be as fatal to the prisoners as to the road-agent kept Matney from sending a bullet crashing through his brain. And even with that great risk before his eyes, the passionate lover might have yielded to the temptation had not the outlaw ended his visit.

"Time's up and I'm going back to receive the old man's decision," he said, turning away, but pausing to add: "If he proves obstinate, I'll see you again. Ta-ta, lady-bird!"

Scarcely had he disappeared when Matney slipped out of the bushes and dropped upon his knees beside the startled maiden, until then forgetting his hideous disguise.

"Maura!" he uttered, in low but passionate tones, as he beheld her shrink away in terror. "It is I—be cautious!"

The warning came none too soon, for in her great wonder and delight at hearing the voice which she had until then believed forever stilled in death, a wild cry was rising to the maiden's lips, which could hardly have escaped notice.

Matney quickly drew her to the edge of the bushes, where the shadow would aid in disguising him, talking in hurried whispers, asking and answering many questions, even in the glad ecstasy of meeting again after what had seemed a farewell forever, remembering their perilous position.

No need to record their conversation word by word. There were many brief passages which never read well on paper, but without which lovers cannot well exist. All too swiftly the moments fled, Matney cheering his love, assuring her that he would rescue her and her father from the power of Elephant Tom or share their fate, be that for weal or woe; but through it all he racked his brain in vain for some positive gleam of light. Save her he must and would—that much he was determined on—but how was it to be accomplished?

"If father refuses to pay the ransom—and you know how dearly he loves money, how painfully he parts with even the smallest sum—promise me one thing, dear Albert," murmured Maura, her fair arms around his neck, her head on his breast.

"Anything—I can refuse you nothing, Maura," he said, pressing his hot lips to her pale brow.

"You heard what that demon threatened? Promise, if all other means fail us, to shoot me

through the brain before you see me made his victim!"

In silence Matney kissed her, and in his eyes she read the answer to her solemn request. Elephant Tom would be foiled in that, if in naught else.

Silently Maura returned his kiss, but then, as the sound of approaching footsteps came to their ears, she breathed:

"Be cautious—for my sake, darling," and rising from his reluctant embrace, she quickly resumed her former position in the moonlight, while Matney drew back into the bushes, just in time to escape the notice of Elephant Tom.

"Come," he said roughly. "The old man wants to see you."

CHAPTER XIII.

TO BLEED OR NOT TO BLEED? THAT IS THE QUESTION.

WHEN Elephant Tom turned away and left him alone to ponder over his dilemma, the thoughts of Horatio Adair were anything but pleasant or rose-colored.

If not what is termed a miser, in the commonest acceptance of the word, gold was the only god he truly worshiped. If he did not take so much delight in the actual handling of the yellow coin or crisp bank-notes, he knew no greater joy than was contained in adding them to his already large store. If he did not deny himself all luxuries, and live the actual life of a miser, he could not pay out a sum of money, large or small, without a wrench such as he might have felt had his heart's strings and those of his purse been one and the same.

In his early youth and manhood he had experienced all the privations and misery of utter penury. He had seen his mother perish of starvation in the very heart of a great city, while his father died at the station-house, from wounds received in attempting burglary, from the proceeds of which he hoped to be able to convey his children far away, where a poor man might the easier fight the stern battle of life.

From that day on his only thought and aim in life was to accumulate riches, if not with strict honesty, at least after such a fashion that his fate could never become like that of his father. And he succeeded, slowly, very slowly, at first; but then came to him the chance presented by the wild, careless prospector, who had at last made a rich "strike," and with his share of the booty thus cunningly obtained, Horatio Adair steadily increased his bank account, gradually widened his field of operations, until to-day he stood one of the richest men in the mighty West, outside the ranks of the select few Bonanza Kings.

It was true that, as Elephant Tom said, he could pay out fifty thousand dollars as demanded by way of ransom, without being crippled, or even seriously feeling the loss, considered from a financial stand-point; but would it end there? Would the audacious road-agent be satisfied with that one mouthful, from a table so heavily laden? Would it not rather whet his lust for gold, and be followed by fresh demands, coupled with the same atrocious threats?

What security had he that Elephant Tom would keep his part of the bargain, when the extortion was complied with? Nothing, save the bare word of a self-admitted robber, outlaw and assassin.

His brain was racked with bitterly conflicting doubts and fears. If only himself had been in peril, he thought he could dare the road-agent's worst, strengthened by the reflection that Elephant Tom would never fatten on his gold. But then came thoughts of Maura—his only child, the one person living for whom his hardened heart could never soften into anything like love—and in the bitterness of that thought, the speculator groaned aloud, cold perspiration starting out anew over his temples.

A thousand maddening fancies filled his whirling brain, and he almost believed that he was going crazy. He beheld the poor girl writhing in the rude clutch of the outlaw, calling on him to preserve her—and he totally helpless—

"Time's up, old fellow!" came the harsh, muffled tones of Elephant Tom, whose stealthy approach had failed to rouse the captive from his brooding thoughts. "There's been enough trifling for once, and now business is the word, pure and simple. What decision have you arrived at?"

With the coming of Elephant Tom, with the sound of his peremptory voice and the sight of his figure, half the fears which had racked the brain of the capitalist during his solitude, vanished like the hoar frost before the genial rays of the autumn sun. Why this should be, I make no attempt to explain, but simply state the curious fact.

"What security have I that your pledge of setting us at liberty will be kept? How do I know that when the money is paid over, you will not recant and demand another pound of flesh?" he growled, grating his teeth savagely as he reflected on his utterly helpless condition.

Elephant Tom laughed maliciously.

"See what an advantage it is to have dealings with a finished professor of scoundrelism and barefaced roguery! Ah! had I only been adopted by you when young and full of eagerness to learn the lessons of life, as interpreted by a master-villain, I, too, might have become a millionaire, instead of plying this precarious method of gaining a living. As it is, in my simplicity and singleness of purpose, I never once thought of a brilliant stroke of genius like that. A thousand thanks for your hint, Horatio Adair."

Elephant Tom plainly enjoyed his sarcasm, but perhaps it would have been better for his main object had he curbed his nimble tongue a trifle.

The fears of Adair were confirmed, and a dogged light came into his fishy eyes.

"Yes, the infernal adroitness with which you have carried out this atrocious scheme, bears ample evidence as to your simplicity and utter ignorance of roguery!" he snarled.

"Thanks for the compliment," and Elephant Tom bowed in cool mockery. "I assure you I feel highly flattered, for a better judge of those qualities couldn't be raked and scraped out of seventeen States. But compliments aside, your answer?"

"Give me some proof that you will be as good as your word, and then I'll talk business," sullenly.

"You have my word, and that is sufficient, under the circumstances—which I'm inclined to think you do not fully realize or appreciate, my dear fellow. To use the vernacular, it's a ground hog case, and you have no choice but to accept my word for the rest. All you have to do is to fork over."

"You know well enough that I don't carry any such large amount with me, or—"

"Worse luck mine!" interrupted Elephant Tom, with a short laugh. "Better fortune yours, since a bird in the hand don't count when reckoning those in the bush. Pardon—go on."

"Even should I yield so far as to write a check, as you demand, you could not realize on it."

"I'm willing to run my chances on that," was the swift reply. "All you have to do is to draw on your partners, Foxy Branscombe and Elias Aiken, at Durango, and write a letter to accompany it, after my dictation. The rest I will attend to."

"They will never cash such an order—"

"Then they will have to change the firm name, and elect a new head-piece, besides going to the useless expense of giving you a burial in style—for, I swear it, by all that's evil! if they refuse to honor your draft, I will kill you by inches, and send your mutilated carcass to them for disposal!"

Sharp and stern came the words, and the blood ran colder in the prisoner's veins as he listened, for each dread syllable bore the unmistakable evidence of truth.

More fully than ever, Horatio Adair realized how completely he was in the toils, and after a brief silence, he growled:

"Bring her here—my daughter. Let me see that she is as yet unharmed, or I'll bid you do your worst with me."

"I'm a fool for humoring you so far," growled Elephant Tom, hesitating, his dark eyes glowing wickedly through the openings in his hideous mask, "but I'll yield that much."

Turning on his heel, he hastened back to where he had left Maura, little dreaming whose eyes were glaring so savagely at him from cover of the bushes hard by, as he held out his gloved hand with an air of mock politeness to the maiden.

Refusing it, Maura rose and followed him, with one mute warning to her lover, as she passed close before his covert.

Her own misery, the peril which threatened them both, was forgotten when Maura beheld her parent as he lay bound upon the ground, and with a cry of mingled joy and sorrow, she dropped upon her knees beside him, lifting his head in her arms and supporting it upon her lap.

With many failings, Horatio Adair had one redeeming virtue; his love for this fair maiden. Harsh, suspicious, overbearing and merciless to all others with whom he came in contact, he was kind and gentle to Maura, in all save that one instance of her love affair with the reckless sport whose mad acts and reckless exploits had for a time been the town talk of all Denver. Dearly as he loved money, for her to express a wish or a whim, was equivalent to having it gratified. And in return, Maura loved him as few children ever learn to love hard, stern parents.

"You coward!" she flashed into the face of Elephant Tom. "To bind him so cruelly! An old man, whose gray hairs should command respect even among outlaws of your stripe!"

"Softly, my lady-bird," jeered the road-agent. "You will do well to bear in mind that I am supreme master in this den. The old scoundrel and skinflint may consider himself lucky that I did not use strips of his own thick hide to bind his hands and feet, while as to you—the less loudly you sing, the longer you'll keep the sweetness of your voice."

Not so much the words, as the tone in which they were uttered, caused her flushed cheek to pale, and her indignant eyes sink before his malignant gaze.

Abruptly changing his tone, Elephant Tom added:

"You asked for your daughter, my dear sir, and I have granted your request. Now for your answer to my demand."

Horatio Adair did not make immediate reply, for his cunning brain was working swiftly, subtly, weighing every chance for or against his escaping without actually sacrificing so much of his idolized gold.

Elephant Tom eyed him closely, and though that thin, hard face told no tales, his keen wit was not deceived, and a hard, grating laugh rumbled from the depths of his mask.

"Tricky as ever, old 'possum! But it won't carry you out of the woods this 'bout, if the court knows herself. Come, out with it, flat-footed; what is your decision? Will you bleed at your pocket, or bleed at your throat? Take your choice and waste no more time, for I must make a business call at a certain office in Durango before the night grows too old."

A sudden hope flashed into the fishy eyes, and Adair spoke eagerly—too eagerly, since it put the outlaw on his guard more completely than ever.

"Give me until you return from that visit. I will answer you positively then. It will give me time to see my way clear."

"Bah!" sneered Elephant Tom. "Do you take me for an idiot? Do you think that I can't read your thoughts? Ay! as plainly as though they were printed in large type upon your brazen cheek! You think I will be risking my life by making this visit to Durango—that there is a chance of my getting rubbed out, or taken prisoner, when you would save your ransom-money—and for that reason you urge a longer probation."

"Come, I have wasted more than time enough. I will dally no longer with you. If you yield and write a draft and the letter to accompany it at my dictation, I will remove your bonds and give my men strict orders to treat you like a gentleman and honored visitor, so long as you remain quiet and give them no unnecessary trouble."

"Refuse, and you shall suffer—but time enough for entering on that when you have refused."

"I will submit to your demands on one condition," slowly uttered Horatio Adair, his face very pale, but his voice hard and metallic, plainly showing that he had arrived at a final determination at last.

"It is for me to name conditions, not you," rudely retorted Elephant Tom; then adding: "But I'll humor you a little further. What condition do you make?"

"My partners are strict men of business, and as such, would not easily credit the story you would have to tell. In a word, I fear they would refuse to either believe or pay you the enormous ransom you demand."

"If it will make you rest any easier," laughed Elephant Tom grimly, "I'll take along the evidence—say an ear!"

"That you are devil enough to do even that I can easily credit," growled the prisoner; "but I can make the matter even more simple. Take my daughter with you and let her tell them the whole truth. Where they might easily enough doubt your words, or refuse to look upon draft or letter as other than rank forgeries, they could not doubt her report."

"And when they cashed your draft I could bid her a loving farewell and return here to set you free?"

Horatio Adair did not like the sneering manner in which these words were uttered, but it was truly a forlorn hope, and fearing to trust his voice just then he nodded vigorously.

Elephant Tom burst into a hard laugh, but there was little of merriment in the cachinnation.

"I begin to believe you more fool than knave after all, Horatio Adair," he uttered, contemptuously. "Do you for a moment imagine that you can throw dust into my eyes so easily? Shall I tell you just what hopes gave that brilliant idea birth? What you thought to gain, should I be simple enough to fall in with your plans?"

"When your daughter told her story, perhaps the draft would be cashed. If so, your partners would shell out because they would feel confident that it would be quickly returned to their own pockets at the expense of my life."

"With her safely out of the fire, they would be willing to run longer chances, so far as you were concerned. They would either follow me secretly, leaving a broad trail behind for an armed force to follow when gathered—not a difficult task in a town like Durango—or else they would try to kill or capture me off-hand; most likely the latter."

"Then, with the information which this lady could give them, they would try to rescue you by force of arms."

As he spoke, Elephant Tom keenly watched the face of his captive, and though Adair strove with partial success to hide his suffocating emo-

tions beneath an imperturbable mask, the cunning road-agent saw sufficient there to confirm his suspicions and convince him that he read aright.

Horatio Adair was willing to run risks if he could only preserve his loved child. With her once out of the merciless clutches of the outlaw, he would take his chances. If Elephant Tom's consent to take her to Durango as proof of his story could be gained, he would write the draft, omitting to place upon it the secret mark which had been agreed upon between the members of the Triad, as an effectual safeguard against forgery. The rest he would leave to them.

"You have tried your last trick, of man, and it has failed to serve you," added Elephant Tom sternly. "You should know by this time that I am not to be bamboozled. You shall write that draft for fifty thousand dollars, or I swear by heaven and earth to torture you so devilishly that you'll be glad to purchase the remnant of your poor life with treble the amount! It is your last chance; will you write?"

"You swear to set us both at liberty if I write?"

"The moment I return with the money you can take your departure," was the swift response.

"And you pledge your word never to molest us again?"

"Now you ask too much. I may never meet either of you after this night; for since I have thrown off my mask and revealed myself to you for what I really am, this part of the country would not be healthy for me. Still, if I should ever run through with this little stake, and saw my way clear to wringing another drop from your heart, I'd be a blank fool to let the opportunity slip.

"Be satisfied with the concessions you have already gained, and don't crowd my good nature too far."

A brief silence, during which the hard, thin face of the prisoner worked convulsively. Avarice, bodily fear, and dread for the result to his daughter were all fighting a desperate battle in the heart and mind of the old man.

"Do your worst!" he hoarsely muttered. "I'll see you eternally damned before I submit to such vile extortion."

Elephant Tom smothered a bitter curse with a mock laugh.

"Bold talk, old fellow; but I'll go you double or quits that you knuckle under in less than half an hour, and beg on your knees like a cur for the chance you now reject!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A CHEERFUL LITTLE BARBECUE.

ELEPHANT TOM blew a short, shrill blast on a metal whistle, in obedience to which half a dozen hooded figures made their appearance and stood before him in silence, awaiting his orders.

Even then the road-agent seemed inclined to temporize, possibly fearing for the coveted ransom money.

"It's the last turn, Horatio Adair," he said, with poorly concealed irritation at such unlooked-for obstinacy. "I give you one more chance to save your hide. If you miss the combination may the devil pity you, for most assuredly I won't!"

"You have my ultimatum," was the sullen response. "When I know that my child is beyond your double-dealing I will write as you say. If you mean to play fair you cannot seriously object to this demand on my side."

"But I do object, most decidedly!"

"Do your worst, then, for I'll see you in the bottomless pit before I write to your dictation!" snarled the prisoner, his voice choked and husky with passion as he glared defiantly up into the hideous mask of the road-agent.

"Good enough—if you only think so," lightly responded Elephant Tom, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Remember the penalty is of your own choosing. If it prove disagreeable do not blame me."

"Get to work, boys," turning to the black-cowled figures who awaited his pleasure in utter silence. "You understand what to do and how to do it. Lively, now!"

The black-hoods sprung into instant life and motion, Elephant Tom, with stumpy arms folded across his swelling chest, watching their movements in grim silence.

Four of their number produced hatchets, and gliding into the adjacent brush plied their tools briskly, soon returning with a number of stout stakes some four feet in length. These were quickly sharpened at one end, then driven a foot or so into the ground a little to the right of where Horatio Adair lay moodily watching their movements.

The stakes were ranged in two rows parallel with each other, about four feet apart, their tops being about a yard above the earth, into which their other extremities were driven. The corner stakes were still further strengthened in their position by being surrounded by stones.

While their fellows were thus busily engaged, the two outlaws, who had scurried away empty-handed, made their reappearance bearing sev-

eral lassoes of braided rawhide, and as his gaze fell upon them, Horatio Adair turned more ghastly pale than ever, despite his fortitude, for he believed that Elephant Tom intended to try hanging as one variety of torture; but his teeth clinched together and not a sound was suffered to escape his lips, as a mocking laugh came to his ears.

"Do give me credit for a little more ingenuity, my dear fellow," cried the road-agent. "Brutal choking is all well enough after its fashion, and between ignorant louts who would deal with a butterfly even as they would with a snapping-turtle; but, with gentlemen of our caliber, the hammer-and-tongs style has passed altogether out of date. Be sure, I'll disgrace neither you nor myself while carrying out this affair."

More the tones than the words he uttered caused the blood to chill in the veins of poor Maura, and forgetting her own peril, she gently lowered the head of her parent to the ground, then knelt at the feet of the masked outlaw, her hands clasped together and uplifted, her face pale and tear-stained, her voice trembling with emotion as she uttered her prayer:

"Spare him—spare my poor father! I ask it in the name of the mother who bore you, and whom you once must have loved and respected. Spare him—he is all I have on earth to love—without him I will be left all alone in the world—"

"Never let that bother you, my dainty ladybird," interposed Elephant Tom, with an ugly laugh. "I'll take his place, and be father, lover, husband—*tria juncta in uno*, as it were—and prove myself such a decided improvement on the original Jacobs, that you'll mark this day with a red letter as being the most fortunate and blessed in the entire catalogue—in token of which I'll place a seal on those rosy lips!"

He stooped, as though about to carry his words to deeds, when Maura struck him sharply with her little fist, uttering an angry cry as she shrunk back to her parent's side.

For an instant Elephant Tom glowered upon her, his eyes flashing through the holes in his mask, his unruly passions evidently urging him to leap upon her and avenge the blow; but then he drew back, motioning his men to complete their work.

It was well for Elephant Tom that he did not give way to his first impulse. Had he done so, and offered to lay a finger on the person of Maura Adair, he would most assuredly have paid the penalty then and there.

When he saw Maura led away by the masked road-agent, Albert Matney could not bring himself to remain behind, though he so interpreted that mute and imploring look which the maiden cast toward his covert as she passed by, but stealthily dogged the footsteps of Elephant Tom, only pausing when close to the outer edge of the ruddy circle of light cast out by the crackling fire.

Fortunately his cover was a dense one, and thus he was not discovered by the black-hoods who answered the signal whistle of their chief, and though his blood was up to boiling pitch, Matney kept concealed until Maura uttered that appeal to the hardened criminal.

He heard the insulting words, and his cocked revolver rose to a level with the brain of Elephant Tom—for he suspected the presence of concealed armor elsewhere. His finger was pressing the trigger. Had Elephant Tom not given over his base purpose, and once more fallen back, that moment would assuredly have ended his earthly career.

As it was, Matney rose from his ambush, and silently drew closer to the spot, holding his cocked pistol ready but hidden in his pocket.

The outlaw chief was standing with his back toward him, and so did not notice his coming; but Maura recognized her lover, despite his disguise, and her heart grew fainter and more sick within her bosom, and she realized what a deadly peril he was daring in his rashness. Yet she dared not make a signal, lest it be noticed by the keen eyes of the road-agent, and his suspicions be awakened to the truth. Afraid to move hands or lips, she strove to convey her wishes through an imploring glance, but Matney, if he saw, did not heed, and advanced until he stood almost within arm's length of Elephant Tom.

The black-hood with the lariats went nimbly to work, without waiting for any further instructions, the whole affair having clearly been arranged beforehand.

One of the lassoes was knotted to a corner stake, then passed around the others, a half-hitch on each keeping it in place. Then two others were crossed and re-crossed from side to side, until the whole rudely resembled a huge gridiron, or framework somewhat similar to that used in jerking meat.

Elephant Tom nodded his approval, when the black-hoods stepped aside after completing their work.

"Good enough, my honest fellows! A king couldn't ask for a more comfortable bed than that, without blushing for shame!"

Stepping forward, he tested the stability of the work, finding it firm enough for the purpose.

"One of you fellows look after the girl—stay," he added abruptly, as the disguised lover started impetuously forward. "I'll tend to that part of the job myself, on second thoughts, while the rest of you rig up the old man."

Poor Maura saw that her lover was on the point of breaking forth in fierce defense of her, and fearing more for him than for herself, she arose as Elephant Tom stepped toward her, making a swift gesture which Matney alone could rightly interpret. It begged him to restrain himself, for her sake.

Elephant Tom noted the gesture, but was wholly at a loss how to understand it, though he cast a suspicious glance about the spot. If he did not suspect the truth, he did notice the presence of one more black hood than he had ordered, and with a stern look and sterner voice, he addressed him:

"Who the deuce gave you permission to intrude here? But, since you have come, fall to work with the rest—lively!"

As a drowning man catches at a straw, so Horatio Adair, in vague hopes of something arising to extricate him from the deadly snare into which he had so hopelessly become involved, lifted his head and glanced eagerly around him.

Elephant Tom saw his motion, and readily interpreted the faint hope in which it found birth. A mocking laugh came from the bearded slit in his mask, followed by the words:

"An army couldn't save you, or rob me of my vengeance, old sinner! If all the friends you could muster in Colorado were to put in an appearance at this moment, I would first shoot you, then blow out the brains of this dainty bit o' calico I am holding in my arms. They might get your bodies, but that is all they would be able to set at liberty."

Though the outlaw had not the slightest idea there was any chance of a rescue being attempted, he spoke with a deadly earnestness that could not be mistaken, and as Maura half reclined upon his stumpy left arm, he drew a revolver in his right hand, cocking it with an ominous click-click.

With a choking groan the head of the speculator fell back.

"It is just as well to have a complete understanding you know," added Elephant Tom, speaking more with an idea of mentally torturing his captives, than from any idea that he was brushing away the shadow of death that hung so threateningly over his own head. "If aught should befall me—if I should fall before I could carry out the threat I have just expressed, my men have their orders to kill you both on the instant. So you see I am guarded at every point."

The mad resolve which was almost shaped in the burning brain of the disguised lover, fell to pieces at these words.

For himself, for Horatio Adair, he cared nothing—but he could not bring almost certain death down upon poor Maura, while the ghost of a chance remained for effecting her rescue without running such deadly risk.

"Get to work there, boys. We've lost too much time in empty fooling. Truss the old rascal up and finish the job."

Sharp and harshly Elephant Tom spoke, and the six black-hoods sprung nimbly to work, Matney following their example, as the surest method of preserving his incognito.

A rude gag was thrust between the old man's jaws after some resistance on his part, which was quickly overcome by the unscrupulous rascals. Then, bound hand and foot, he was picked up and placed upon the rude gridiron lengthwise, flat on his back. The thongs which held his hands were then cast off, his arms stretched out at right angles with his body, and then firmly bound to the stakes on either side. His feet were treated after the same fashion, then the black-hoods fell back, leaving their victim without the power of moving a muscle, save those that controlled his head.

"I'd hate mightily to defraud the boys out of their anticipated sport, after taking all these pains to make you comfortable, my dear sir," said Elephant Tom, drawing a little nearer, so he could gaze directly into the pale face of his victim; "but at the same time I'm bound to give you every reasonable chance to redeem yourself. Even now you have only to yield compliance with my wishes, and write that note, and you shall be set free. If you consent, wink your right eye."

Instead of winking, those fishy eyes, now red with blood, glared mute defiance into the ugly mask of the outlaw, speaking plainer than words his obstinate refusal to yield.

Poor Maura noted that mute defiance, and she felt the form of the road-agent quivering with the mad rage and chagrin which he was unable to entirely smother. Dreading the consequences, she made another appeal to the wretched prisoner.

"Do as he says, father—for my sake, if not for your own. What is gold in comparison with your life? Nothing—worse than nothing! Pay the ransom this cruel man demands, and let us hasten away from this horrible country. It is not so much—I will try to make up the loss to you, dear father. Give assent, and he will keep his

pledge. Will you not?" and she turned swiftly toward the outlaw chief.

"On my honor as a gentle—thief and robber," declared Elephant Tom, plainly giving the sentence a very different termination from that which sprung to the tip of his tongue.

But Horatio Adair was not moved to consent. Perhaps he would have been less obstinate, could he have brought himself to believe that Elephant Tom would keep perfect faith with him. Though so avaricious, the speculator was very far from being anxious to take his departure from this world, and, though parting with such a large sum of money under such circumstances, would give his heart a terrible wrench, he would long since have yielded to the pressure, but for that bitter doubt.

He recalled the past days, when he and his partners had so deeply wronged George Brent, stripping him of his property, his good name, and casting him into prison through perjured testimony. He remembered how fiercely the condemned man had sworn to live for revenge, and that his uneasy dreams were often haunted by the memory of those words until the story was spread abroad that Brent had committed suicide in his cell, after a frustrated attempt to escape.

He knew now that that report had been without sufficient foundation—that the convict lived to serve his time, and was now free to work his long-delayed vengeance.

Was it likely that he would be content with even so large a sum of money? Adair felt not, for his share in the spoils in that one case had amounted to nearly double the sum.

He felt in his own mind that Elephant Tom would hold them until he could draw the cash on the draft, and then, instead of setting them at liberty, according to contract, would either apply the same screw with renewed force, or else wreak his hatred on him after a more bloody fashion.

Believing that there was absolutely no hope for him to escape those grim clutches with life, should he once yield so far as to pay the ransom-money, he resolved to curtail the triumph of the road-agent as much as possible. If nothing less would content him, let him lap his fill of blood, but never a golden coin should his greedy fingers clutch, though he brought to bear all the devilish arts of the terrible inquisition of olden days. Better torture and death than torture, death and spoliation.

In desperate defiance he glared unwinkingly into the face of the road-agent, only the suffocating gag with which his jaws were painfully distended, keeping him from pouring out a torrent of bitter imprecations upon the head of his merciless captor.

Elephant Tom lifted his hand with a swift gesture, and the black-hoods, readily interpreting his meaning from their previous instructions, scattered into the bushes, quickly returning with dry grass, twigs and bits of wood, with which they liberally strewed the ground immediately beneath the captive.

"All set, boys?" asked Elephant Tom as the black-hoods drew back a little. "Good enough! We'll try what virtue there is in a trifle of heat, skillfully applied to where it will do the most good. Touch her off, my gallant fellows!"

Chuckling with grim delight, the outlaws obeyed, snatching the brands from the fire and scattering them amidst the dry and inflammable fuel with which the soil beneath the rude gridiron was covered, fanning it into a blaze.

Little by little the flames gained in strength and vigor, sending out their serpent-like tongues, curling and twining, now creeping along the ground, now shooting up as though to inspect their destined victim, little waves of smoke ascending until checked by the spread-eagled body of the luckless speculator, then curling and rolling to either side until finding a freer passage, but still hanging about, as though loth to depart without witnessing the end.

Little by little the heat of the growing flames increased, until the scent of scorching cloth was mingled with that of the crackling fuel, until the figure of the prisoner, despite the dogged resolution with which he strove to subdue and suppress all signs of pain, began to quiver and tremble.

A moan of horror broke from the blanched lips of the maiden, as she could no longer doubt the truly horrible purpose of the road-agent, and then her over-tasked brain gave way, and she hung a limp and lifeless weight across the stumby right arm of the outlaw.

"Here, take the girl," growled Elephant Tom, addressing no person in particular, and making no objections as the disguised lover sprung forward to relieve him of the fair burden. "Take her back and keep close watch over her. Needn't take the trouble to restore her to consciousness. It's only a common fainting-fit, and she'll be nothing the worse for it."

In truth, though he did not put the thought into plain words, Elephant Tom was rather glad than otherwise that Maura had lost her consciousness thus early in the game. Hard, cruel, merciless as he proclaimed himself, it was proving no easy matter to torture the parent before his only child's eyes.

Albert Matney clasped the senseless form to his panting bosom and hastily bore her from the spot, the unsuspecting road-agent not deigning to follow them with a single glance.

His quick eye saw that the clothing of his victim was on fire, and calling to his men, he himself aided in tearing away the flames which had already scorched the tender skin to a blister. The fire beneath was beaten down, and standing where he could gaze into the sweat-beaded countenance of Horatio Adair, Elephant Tom spoke mockingly:

"Well, my dear sir, how do you like it, as far as you've got? Red hot fun, ain't it? And yet, carried to excess, it might prove really tiresome; don't you think so?"

His hard face drawn with pain, the prisoner glared up into the mask of his tormentor, his bloodshot eyes hardly human in their deadly hatred and fury. But not a trace of weakness, not a sign of yielding, even yet.

Elephant Tom smothered a fierce curse, as he added:

"You've got a taste of the medicine with which we dose our refractory patients, and from it can judge what effect a full dose will have on a stubborn case. If you are satisfied, do as I told you—wink your right eye, and I'll set you at liberty. Refuse—all right!" with a savage snarl, as he read unshaken resolution in those staring eyes. "We'll see how much you can stand without knuckling."

"Stir it up, boys! I'll do him to a turn, this time!"

Hugely enjoying the novel sport, the black-hoods obeyed.

CHAPTER XV.

FOXY BRANSCOMBE AMAZES HIS PARD.

A HORRIBLE screech of mingled pain and baffled fury burst from the lips of Dirigo Branscombe, as he stood rigidly erect in the moonlight for a moment after Tompoleon Tarbox discharged his second shot. The agonizing shock of the tearing bullet forced his head back, and as his hat dropped to the ground, the light was sufficient for the breathless spectators to see that the miner athlete had spoken no more than the truth.

"Shot his bugle off, or I'm a nigger!" cried Wes. Hardecastle. "An' he mought jast as easy blowed center through him as to knock the han'le off! Whooray fer we, us an' comp'ny! Ef them's the kind o' sardines you fellers is pickin' up fer a easy lunch, reckon this critter'll stick to plain red her'n' an' never mind the trimmin's!"

Foxy Branscombe heard the exultant speech, and seemed to think the words came from Tompoleon Tarbox, for a mad snarl came from his bloody lips and his left hand tore the second revolver from his belt. He raised the weapon, but his nerves were so terribly shaken that he found it impossible to hold steady or catch anything like a bead. Once, twice, he fired in mad desperation, but the lead sped wide of the mark, and Tompoleon made no effort to avoid or return the shots.

"Whoa, you clumsy critter!" he cried, tantalizingly. "Fust thing you know you'll be blowin' the bull top o' your own cabeza off—which it'd be a burnin' shame to cheat the fool-killer or the hangman out o' thar jest dues. Steady, Mary Ann! Nother lurch like that an' down you'll plump ker-chunk, an' spread that bugle o' yourn all over your face!"

With difficulty Foxy Branscombe kept from falling as he made a blind rush toward his enemy; and then, forced to realize his utter impotence for the moment, he came to a stop, a howling, snarling, groaning curse hissing through his bloody foam-flecked lips.

A sudden and complete change came over Tompoleon Tarbox.

His mockery vanished, and was replaced by a stern seriousness.

"Gents, I ask you one an' all to say ef the thing was conducted on the dead level? Ef thar was any onfair play say so now, an' I'll try my smartest to prove that you lie in sayin' it, man ag'inst man, or one ag'inst the hull gang. Speak out!"

Silence, save for the mad ravings of the defeated duelist.

"You ain't a-kickin' then? Good enough! I cooked that p'izen critter's right duke to keep him from hurtin' a whiter man. I knocked his smellier out o' plum to keep him from folleerin' of it into any more seech dirty cussedness as he did this day. Either bit o' lead I could 'a' sent through his brain-pan or the lump o' dirty sponge he calls his heart, jast as easy. The rules o' this game gives me a perfect right to shoot him now, ef I want. But I don't. It'd make my dreams smell bad fer a month o' Sundays to hev his wipin' out onto my conscience. I'd blush fer 'tarnal shame every time I went to shave in a lookin'-glass, an' I'd feel nastier than a man what stomped a skunk to death in his bar' feet!"

"Ef he's got a fri'nd left here, take him home an' patch him up ef ye think he's wuth the trouble."

"Es fer me, I'm goin' back to town. Ef I'm wanted, I kin be found without sendin' out the crier fer lost childurn an' his bell. Jest climb a

dry-goods box an' howl out fer Tompoleon Tarbox, from Purgatoire, an' he'll come at ye, right eend up'ards, chuck full o' fun an' ready fer biz—you bet!"

Elias Aiken did not wait for the conclusion of this voluble speech before stepping forward and taking charge of his badly demoralized partner and before the final words were enunciated, he was supporting Dirigo Branscombe toward town, aided by a half-drunken surgeon, whom an imperative signal had summoned to his aid.

Followed by a portion of the crowd, they reached town and pressed on to the office of the Triad, where Elias Aiken paused long enough to scribble a few words upon a card, which he tossed to one of the foremost, saying:

"Thanks for your escort and sympathy, gentlemen, but just now Mr. Branscombe needs rest and quiet far more. Present that card and drink to a speedy recovery for the poor man's friend."

"Free drinks, boys!" yelled the fellow who caught the card. "Ef that ain't clean white, I'm a liar! Three cheers in a whisper fer Aiken an' Branscombe—spout'er out!"

A rather loud whisper, but those in honor of whom it was given did not wait to acknowledge the compliment, but entered the office, Aiken locking the door behind them before striking a light.

The doctor, really a skillful practitioner, despite his inordinate appetite for drink and general vagabondism, set to work to patch up the demoralized duelist as best he could.

The right arm had been broken just above the elbow by the first shot fired by Tompoleon Tarbox, but the bone was not badly shattered, and the injury proved really less serious than that which mutilated his nose.

The lead had passed close to his face, mangling the entire end of his nose in such a manner that the surgeon had to use his knife before applying lotions and bandages.

Foxy Branscombe would never again be able to pass for a handsome man, even with those who never looked beneath the surface in forming their estimates of beauty.

He had lost considerable blood, while the deadly rage which had so wholly taken possession of him, soul and body, had still further exhausted him; yet his indomitable spirit was not quelled, and no sooner were his hurts dressed, than he dismissed the surgeon, and bade Aiken draw nearer.

"Bring out some brandy," he huskily growled, his voice sounding strange and unnatural, thanks to the muffling bandages and the entire stoppage of his nasal conduits.

"You mustn't drink. Remember what Doc said."

"Curse Doc, and you, too, if you try to cross me now!" snarled the wounded speculator. "Bring drink, I say! This infernal blood-letting makes me weak—weak, just when I must be strong—strong to think, and plot, and act! Man alive, the devil himself is fairly afoot, ready to grip our throats with his paws, and we've got to fight swift and hard, if we hope to save ourselves!"

Awed by the fierce, hoarse whisper with which these last words were uttered, Elias Aiken offered no further remonstrance, but turning aside to a little cupboard in the wall near where stood the massive iron safe bearing on its front the firm name, produced glasses and a couple of bottles.

"Sit down," growled Branscombe, hitching his chair up to the little table which stood in the center of the room. "Open, and give me some. I'm hollow clean down to the heels."

"At your own risk, then, not mine," muttered Aiken. "There is the bottle; help yourself, if you will cut your throat."

With a hand that trembled from bodily weakness until the neck of the bottle clinked sharply against the edge of his glass, Foxy Branscombe poured out a heavy draught of the powerful liquor, then swallowed it at a gulp, repeating the action without a word, Elias Aiken moodily staring at him the while.

The effect of the brandy was almost instantly perceptible, for ordinarily the speculator was an abstemious man. His bloodshot eyes grew brighter, his voice sounded less shaky.

"That's more like it! Poison yourself, old man."

"What the foul fiend does all this work mean, anyhow?" demanded Aiken, paying no attention to the grim advice. "What tumbled you into that mess out yonder? What have you been doing to that girl of Rebel George's?"

"Making a fool of myself, I more than suspect," was the grim response. "Yet at the time, I flattered myself I was playing a smart game—and by Jupiter I believe so yet!"

"What do you mean?" savagely demanded Aiken. "Curse you, Foxy Branscombe, can't you speak out plain?"

"Don't let your angry passions rise, my dear fellow," the other said, drawingly, his passion calming as that of the other rose higher. "Unless I'm way out of the track, you'll need all your coolness and wit, before game is called, unless it is to be scored against us."

Elias Aiken saw that his partner was in an unusually contrary mood, and as the surest

mode of getting at the truth, he said no more, sinking back into his chair, sullenly waiting.

"That's more like it," and Foxy Branscombe nodded approvingly. "Now to business; have you forgotten George Brent?"

"What has he got to do with this affair? Dead and rotted years ago!" growled Aiken, impatiently.

"So you think—so I believed until a few days ago. And all the time he has been living—right at our elbow, too!"

Aiken stared at his partner as though he believed his brain had suddenly given way. Branscombe laughed, grimly.

"All the same, it's the gospel truth. George Brent is none other than Rebel George Bretto. Stop!" he growled, as the lips of his amazed partner parted as though to interrupt him. "Let me tell it all, now."

"Never mind what aroused my suspicions in the first place. I fought against them, even while I was busy looking for proofs, and never really suffered myself to believe it so, until I sent to the spot where we all along thought George Brent dead and buried, to discover that he had served his time out and received his discharge. Still I was not satisfied, but kept at work until I gained positive proof that Rebel George is indeed our old opponent."

"Impossible!" gasped Aiken. "He would have shot ere this. He would never have let us rest so long. He would have demanded a settlement at the muzzle of a revolver!"

"The old George Brent, I grant you," said Branscombe, with deliberation, as he poured out and sipped more brandy. "Rebel George is older and wiser. Not that he is less vengeful, or I greatly mistake him. But he had proof in the past how hard we could hit when it came to open blows, and he is playing a deeper game to get square. Tell me, how many times have we been hit hard by this infernal Elephant Tom?"

"You know as well as I; why ask?"

"Simply because our George Brent is Elephant Tom!"

More than ever amazed, Elias Aiken stared at his partner, his dull eyes widely opened, his heavy countenance the picture of stupid wonder. Slow and sluggish, his brain could not at once grasp the situation.

"It is gospel truth, old mate," nodded Foxy Branscombe. "I haven't got positive proof as yet, but it's coming. Take a square look at the facts. Each time that Elephant Tom has struck us, it has been just after Rebel George has lost heavily at cards. Each time he has disappeared long enough to take part in the robbery, returning again when the work was done, well healed for tackling the tiger again. Put the two things together. Add that he is George Brent, whom we so neatly skinned years ago. Count them all up. What does it look like?"

"But you can't prove it," persisted Aiken.

"Not just yet, but I will before another week," confidently retorted Branscombe. "I've said nothing, but set good men to work, and if I don't lay Elephant Tom by the heels—if I don't pull Rebel George out of that cunning shell—I'll own up to being a fool from top to toe!"

"It looks improbable. I can't believe all you say."

"No matter. It's none the less true. Disbelieve it if you choose, but see that you do your share of the work, now that I am crippled—the foul fiend fly away with that bloodhound!" he snarled, grating his wolfish teeth savagely. "To have him turn up just now, when we need all our energies to hold our end level with Elephant Tom!"

"Who is he? What is he?" impatiently demanded Aiken, his face flushing with signs of anger. "You say I must do my share of the work, yet you leave me all in the dark. You acted the part of a mad or drunken fool out there to-night, and when I took your side in good part you tangle me up in the dark, giving just hint enough to let me suspect something crooked, but without speaking plain enough to show me which way to step to avoid rushing you into deep water. If I'm to do anything more in this affair, you want to spit out the flat-bottomed truth in a hurry!"

A short, grim laugh broke from the bandaged lips.

"Good enough! I've got you fairly stirred up at last. It was just what I've been working for. Now listen: that infernal rascal must never see the sun rise again."

"It's mighty easy to kill him—in your mind," grunted Aiken, with a cynical curl of his thick lip. "Of course, the fellow would make no objections—he was willing enough when you tackled him so skillfully out yonder. He would sink out of sight without a sign, without a question being asked by any of his new friends; and I tell you, old fellow, that were a poll of the town to be taken to-night it would show two of his friends to one for us, thanks to your foul play!"

Elias Aiken spoke tartly, spitefully. No less hardened in evil work than Foxy Branscombe, his peculiar weakness was an overwhelming desire to stand well in the eyes of honest men. He loved money, but he loved popular applause more.

"Let them ask what questions they choose,"

growled the injured speculator. "Let them suspect—let them even prove that he met his death at our hands or through our schemings—and still it will be less danger to us than to have him live on. We've got to put him out of the way!"

"Who is he? How can he injure us to that extent?"

"The keenest-nosed bloodhound in the West. At first I believed him the rough brute he looks and wishes all to consider him; but when he was cornered out yonder I read the truth, and knew him for what he is—a detective, after us!"

"What for?" demanded Aiken incredulously. "My record is clean enough to fear nothing from any detective on earth."

"Bah!" snarled Foxy Branscombe, a sharp twinge of pain from his wounded face turning a laugh of bitter mockery into a hissing curse on Tompoleon Tarbox and all his posterity. "So you thought there was nothing to fear from Rebel George!"

"And so I still think."

"The flames of Tophet wither the hand that crippled me like a dog!" grated the wounded man, hurling his empty glass across the room, to shiver into countless fragments against the massive iron safe. "Only for that, I'd fight my own battles and let you go your own bull-headed course, straight to destruction! You think you know it all! And yet, without me, you would have died in a ditch or swung from a stout limb, years ago! Even as I am—in one word: will you carry out the work I set you to do? No ifs or ands; plain yes or no!"

His fierce and threatening air, his bitter scorn, awed the more sluggish ruffian, and Elias Aiken silently nodded.

The ugly frown passed away, and Foxy Branscombe spoke with something like his customary smoothness.

"That's business. I can depend on your word, when once you pass it, and now, if I say anything too sharp, just rub it off your memory, and lay it to this confounded smarting."

"It went in at one ear and out at the other. You've been like a crazy man ever since I met you out yonder. If I didn't know better, I'd be almost willing to swear that you hovered on the verge of *del. trem.* I try hard to believe what you tell me, but I can't swallow it. Still, I'll carry out whatever you bid me look after: only speak plain, so there can be no possibility of a mistake to be regretted when too late."

"You ask what you have to fear from a detective: have you forgotten a man called Darius Epperson?" whispered Branscombe, leaning across the table, and his sound hand fluttering close to his lips, as though to muffle the sounds he uttered.

Elias Aiken cast a swift, apprehensive glance around him, his florid countenance turning ghastly pale, as though he feared those whispered words might evoke some frightful specter from out the shadows which the one lamp failed to wholly rout from the corners of the room. And when he spoke, his voice was husky, quavering, unnatural.

"He's dead—why bring up his name now?"

"Dead? Ay! as dead as George Brent!"

"What do you mean? Not that—that he is—"

"Alive, and on our track, more to be feared than ever before!" grated Branscombe, his face distorted with intense passion, his bloodshot eyes fairly aflame. "Man alive, are you blind, that you failed to recognize him, even after the hint I gave you out yonder, when you were posing for the admiration and applause of the crowd?"

"You don't mean—not that man?" faltered Aiken.

"Ay! but I do! Tompoleon Tarbox, as he calls himself—Darius Epperson, as I now know him to be!"

"He would never have let you escape when he had you at his mercy, if he were that devil!"

"Bah! you heard his words—his sneer that he would not rob the hangman—and still doubt? If he had been the man he pretends wouldn't he have killed me? Of course! But he fancied his disguise was impenetrable. He never suspected that I recognized him for the man we tried to kill—whom we could have sworn we did kill and see buried—and he let me go then, to bring me up all the more surely when he could gain both revenge and fame by twisting the halter for our throats."

"It does not seem possible!" gasped Aiken, wiping the great drops from his brow with a trembling hand.

"You will see that it is, unless we can get in the first blow. Even to-morrow may be too late. Will you take my word for it and follow my advice?"

"If you don't ask me to tackle him with my own hand. I can't believe it's that demon; but still, the very thought so completely unnerves me that I could not tackle him."

"Nor do I ask you," was the swift response. "Our hand must not be seen in this affair, if we can avoid it. After the sensation he created this evening, his turning toes up will cause a

mighty breeze, sufficient to swamp even us, if we don't have clean hands to show."

"What can I do, then?" sullenly demanded Aiken.

"Listen: The story that man told was the truth. He did catch me fooling with Naomi Bretto. He took me wholly by surprise, from the rear, and I had not the ghost of a chance in his hands. He slapped my face, kicked me out of the house."

"I never suspected him then, for his blows half blinded me. Still, I swore I'd get even, and as luck would have it, I ran across Michigan Slim, just when my blood was at fever heat, and I hired him to kill the fellow."

"You know how it turned out. He killed Michigan and Ned Burke. The third man was Tripphammer, who made his escape. You must find him, and put him to work."

"But if he should miss, and blow on us?"

"I'll fix that. Give me pen, ink and paper."

"If he should get killed, the note might be found, and there are men enough here who can swear to your hand-writing. Remember that note on Michigan Slim," warned Aiken, uneasily.

Foxy Branscombe smiled grimly, but said nothing as he took the pen in his left hand and slowly, heavily printed a few lines, then passed it over to his partner, who read:

"I know who was the third man helping Michigan Slim. If Tompoleon Tarbox lives to see to-morrow's sun, he will be equally as wise, when your life won't be worth the paper these words are written on. Silence him, and you are safe. Let this little token strengthen your arm. After the funeral, you shall receive twice as much more. If you flunk, and Tarbox fails to wipe you out, the hand that sends this will send you to rejoin Michigan Slim and Ned the Nailer."

From an inner pocket, while Aiken was reading the note, Foxy Branscombe drew a wallet and extracted therefrom five hundred dollars in bank notes. These he folded up inside the paper, slipping a rubber band around all.

"You must hunt up Tripphammer. He's a cool, bold rascal, and long before this has learned that his agency in the fracas out yonder is unsuspected. He'll be at some of the dives in town, most likely where the crowd is greatest, to be sure of aid from his mates, if Tarbox gets on his track. By watching your chance, it will not be difficult for you to slip this package into his hand or pocket, without being seen or recognized. If the money is not sufficient, the threat will turn the scale, and he'll take our enemy from behind, trusting to escaping unobserved in the confusion, or else to his known liking for Michigan carrying him safely through."

"But if he refuses?"

"He dare not, after that threat. Do as I say, and make haste back. We must talk over this affair of Rebel George, and get ready to square accounts with him. Go, and hasten."

Elias Aiken, though clearly far from relishing the duty assigned him, took the packet and hastily left the office.

Foxy Branscombe sat drinking and plotting.

CHAPTER XVI.

RUNNING THE GANTLET.

TENDERLY Albert Matney clasped the unconscious maiden to his bosom and bore her away from the scene of her father's torture. He could hear the stern threats of Elephant Tom as he ordered the renewal of the fire, but he felt how utterly helpless he was to save the unfortunate capitalist, alone and single-handed against the gang of road-agents.

"I'd risk my own life, willingly enough, Heaven knows!" he muttered, unconscious in his whirling excitement that he was breathing the thought aloud. "But not hers—my poor, suffering darling! You before all else!" and as he gained the spot where he had first discovered Maura as a captive, he lifted the blood-stained hood from his face, and pressed his lips passionately to hers.

Not a sign of consciousness—no returning pressure. The poor, overtasked brain had temporarily yielded to the frightful strain, and she lay limp and lifeless across his arm.

Gently he lowered her form to the green sward, then stood beside her, his brain busily at work.

Though as yet he had not the slightest suspicion of all that Elephant Tom had revealed to Horatio Adair—of claiming to be the much-wronged George Brent, who had planned and plotted so cunningly to gain full possession of the leading member of the Triad—he felt that Maura was in peril of far worse than death, as long as she remained in the power of the notorious road-agent.

He vowed to save her; but how could he carry out his vow?

There was no time to waste, and his brain worked swiftly as he stood over the maiden whom he loved far better than he did his own life. A minute—then he settled the bloody hood well over his face, and making sure that the weapons in his belt were ready for use, he moved toward the tunnel.

This time he took no precautions, walking boldly through the patches of moonlight, as though inviting observation. Such was precisely his

idea, and when, as he drew close to the tunnel entrance, a black-hood started out from the shade to meet him, he did not try to avoid the encounter.

"How goes it, Dandy?" asked the road-agent in a muffled voice, coming as it did from beneath the somber folds, and apparently recognizing the disguise worn by Matney. "I thought you was on duty outside?"

Matney, not knowing what peculiarity of tone might distinguish the fellow called Dandy from his fellows, was taken with a fit of coughing as he replied, his voice being barely articulate; but the outlaw seemed to suspect nothing, adding:

"How's the boss gittin' along? What's he doin', anyhow?"

"Toastin' the old man," coughed Matney, huskily.

"Is he squealin' any? Gritty old cuss, I reckon!"

"The boss'll fetch him," gasped the disguised lover, still more seriously affected. "He sent me—cuss the coughin'!—me to call you. Wants you for somethin', right off."

The road-agent made no response, but started forward, Matney treading close to his heels. Not far. The moment he entered the screen of bushes behind which Maura lay, still unconscious, Matney drove a knife to the hilt between his shoulders, clapping his left hand firmly over the lips of the death-stricken outlaw, drawing him back against his own breast with a power that held him from moving or uttering a groan.

Mercely was his grip maintained, until absolutely certain that there was no danger of his uttering a death yell or groan, then Matney allowed the limp figure to slip down at his feet.

A keen glance around him showed that none had noticed the brief struggle, and bending over his victim, Matney stripped off his hood, shirt, and trousers, then bending a few low branches over the stark form, the better to foil the beams of the moon, should any of the road-agents pass that way before he had gained time sufficient to carry out his bold plans.

With the garments in his hands, he passed through to where Maura was lying, still motionless, though as he bent over her he fancied he could hear the first faint moan of returning consciousness.

Working swiftly, yet tenderly, he lifted the head of the maiden, and drew the blood-stained shirt over her form. He was about slipping the hood in place, when Maura moved slightly, and acting on a sudden impulse, he picked her up in his arms, and taking with him the remnants of the intended disguise, bore her through the dense shadows cast by the rocks, nearer to the tunnel, further away from the scene of torture.

Maura opened her eyes, and Matney hastily lifted his hood, turning his face so that she could recognize it, as he placed one hand over her pale lips, whispering:

"Not a word, dear girl—on your life be silent!"

"Father—spare him!" murmured Maura, brokenly.

"He is safe, never fear, darling," he uttered, soothingly.

"Where? Take me to him!"

His brain was all alive now, and working swiftly. He knew that Maura would never consent to abandon her father, for, whatever may have been his faults and his crimes toward others, to her he had ever been kind, his love never failing.

Alone, he could not hope to rescue him from the iron grip of Elephant Tom. Once outside, there might be a chance. Yet he could not leave Maura there while he hastened for aid.

There was only one course to pursue, and realizing this, knowing that in her confused, bewildered state she was not capable of close reasoning, he spoke hurriedly:

"I will take you to him, Maura, if you will trust me entirely and do just as I bid you, without wasting precious time in asking questions."

"Anything—I promise—only take me to poor father!"

"He is safe for the present. I rescued him, but the outlaws are now hunting for him. They don't suspect me, and have left me to guard you. We must steal away before they get back or all is lost. Will you do just as I say?"

Maura nodded, her trembling lips refusing to utter the words she would have shaped, and Matney hurriedly added:

"I fear there are some of the outlaws on guard by the entrance, and were I to attempt to take you outside without being disguised they would give the alarm. Please put on these trousers. You can draw them on by tucking your skirts inside. Hasten! The delay of a minute may be fatal to us—to your father!"

There was no time to waste in consulting false modesty, and Matney aided the trembling, bewildered maiden to don the garments, luckily very large in the waist. A cord secured them sufficiently for all purposes, and supporting her with one arm, the other hand clasping a cocked revolver, he moved toward the tunnel, whispering in her ear an adjuration to be brave for the sake of her father.

Most fortunately these precautions proved needless, for, though they passed within sight of one black-hood, he was moving toward the scene of torture, and never glanced in their direction, while the tunnel was found empty.

Matney had nerved himself for swift, deadly work, in case they should be intercepted by curious or suspicious black-hoods, and it was with a long breath of relief that he reached the further extremity of the tunnel without being accosted.

Still supporting the trembling figure of Maura on his arm, he paused long enough to take a keen, comprehensive glance outside before parting the leafy screen.

His beheld the still figure of the sentinel whose garb had stood him in such good stead, occupying the same position in which he had propped it, and that assured him no discovery of the tragedy had as yet taken place.

Since the corpse was propped against the rock the moon had altered its position sufficiently to change gloom into brightness. The silvery beams now fell full upon the pain-distorted countenance, rendered doubly repulsive by the red streaks where the mingled blood and brains had oozed from the shattered skull and crossed the ashen face.

No one, looking from the mouth of the tunnel, could avoid noticing this, and as Albert Matney twisted the black hood which covered the fair head of his charge away, he interposed his own form between her and that gruesome sight, then pushed boldly out of the dense cover into open air and bright moonlight, softly muttering in her ear:

"Walk boldly, my precious! Only a little longer. We are passing the last peril now. Be brave and fear naught!"

Across the moonlight and into the first shadow he could reach Matney supported the weak maiden, yet striving to give their close companionship the air of confidential communing between two boon companions, rather than of one assisting the footsteps of another.

Still not a sound of either discovery or suspicion, and when a little distance beyond the shoulder of rocks which shut off all view of the entrance to the hidden pocket, Matney paused, his doubts were gone, his misgivings vanishing.

In the scant time allowed him for deciding on the course he should pursue, even his quick-working brain had been unable to more than roughly shape his course after the first step should be taken. He must escape from the pocket with Maura Adair; beyond that, he could see nothing distinctly, and could only leave his actions to be decided by the emergencies as they should arise.

Now that he had fairly cleared the pocket, he began to see his way more clearly. What had at first appeared an impossibility now looked far more feasible, and his decision was quickly taken.

Again assisting Maura, he pressed on down the valley for several hundred yards, keeping in the densest shadows, more by instinct than from any actual fear of being discovered by inimical eyes, pausing again when a secure covert was gained.

"Maura, I must leave you here alone for a few moments, but there is no cause for fear if you remain quiet and do not leave these shadows for the bright moonlight."

"Father—where is he? You said you would take me to him, Albert," uttered the maiden, with more calmness than she had shown since witnessing the frightful scene in the mountain pocket, where her parent played such a prominent part.

"It is for his good that I am leaving you alone for a few moments, darling," softly breathed Matney, touching his lips reassuringly to her brow. "I will soon return, and I must find you exactly where I leave you. No matter what you hear, for your life and mine do not stray from this spot."

"I will obey, Albert; but hasten back—and bring father with you. You will, dear?"

"I will bring you together safe and sound, or lose my own life in the attempt, Maura," he whispered in response, his dark eyes glowing with earnestness. "Remember, our lives may depend on my finding you here and ready, without the delay of a moment. If I come silently, say not a word until I touch you; if I am running and call out your name, creep back into this niche and lie there until daylight, unless I should return for you earlier. If I utter your name and add the word come, step out to this little sapling and yield yourself freely to my grasp, without struggling to help in any way. You are sure to comprehend my words fully, Maura?"

"Yes, I will do just as you say. Only hasten back, and bring poor father with you," murmured the maiden, throwing her arms around his neck and pressing her lips to his for an instant, then releasing and pushing him away.

Though her brain was still very far from composed and clear as under ordinary circumstances, Maura Adair understood from the hasty speech and repeated warnings of her lover that he was on the point of facing some imminent peril, the results of which venture might prove

fatal to their hopes of escape, but which could not be avoided. Perhaps it was well that her brain was still obfuscated, else she might have lost still more precious time in trying to persuade him to abandon his purpose, or in seeking a more perfect knowledge of its nature.

Fearing to delay longer, though still reluctantly leaving the maiden alone in her bewildered condition, Albert Matney obeyed that gentle impulse, and stole away under cover of the shade, not emerging into the moonlight until at a considerable distance from the covert in which he left Maura Adair.

Then he turned toward the point where he had reconnoitered the horses and their guards earlier in the evening.

For a brief space he hesitated whether to approach boldly, trusting to his disguise and weapons to carry him safely through without alarming the road-agents within the pocket, or to use stealth as before. Both possessed their advantages as well as serious drawbacks—the first was desperately full of risk, for he could hardly hope to overcome two stout men, fully armed and used to rough work, without their giving the alarm to their comrades—yet it was the quickest method of accomplishing the object on which he had set his heart, and time was of the utmost importance now.

"If alone, or if that poor child was a man, I'd take the chances on it," he muttered. "Thanks to this disguise, I could approach them within arm's length without their suspecting anything, and then the knife would make swift work of it. But I could hardly kill both without at least one's giving a yell or cry loud enough to alarm those within the pocket. Then it would be a race for life, with the odds all against us, in this strange region. No, the slowest course is the best, though at any moment now our flight may be discovered."

Seeing that his revolvers played freely in their scabbards, and drawing the trusty knife which had cut short one evil life that night, Matney stole along under the best cover practicable, his dark eyes keenly scrutinizing the ground before him, in quest of the horse-guards, hoping to still find them sleeping as when he last passed the spot.

A bright gleam came into his eyes, and a breath passed hissing through his lips, as he finally discovered the two road-agents lying side by side, still and motionless, to all appearance, soundly sleeping on their post of duty.

Silently, stealthily he crawled nearer and nearer, his blood-stained weapon ready for use, feeling not the slightest compunction at the thought of taking their lives, since the welfare of his loved one demanded their removal. Still closer—only to start back with a low cry of amazement and horror.

A whirling gust of wind turned aside the tip of a bending bough which had until then shielded the faces of the two men from the moonlight, and Matney saw that their black hoods were no longer in place, leaving their faces bare, upturned toward the sky. But it was not this alone that so startled him. That brief withdrawal of the shadowy curtain showed him far more than that.

He saw the open, staring eyeballs—saw one bloody, gaping throat, and red stains upon the bosom of the other outlaw.

Some deadly enemy had been before him. But who?

He dared not pause to untangle the bloody enigma. At any moment now might come the angry yell of discovery from the pocket. He could see the horses standing beyond, tethered, unmoved by the tragedy which had taken place so near them. With one of them he might hope to carry his loved one to safety. Without such aid their case was desperate indeed.

Expecting with each moment to receive a shot or a blow from the unknown slayer, Matney glided swiftly toward the animals, and, selecting the best-looking one among them, rapidly adjusted saddle and bridle.

Not a sound or sign of the secret slayer while he was thus occupied, and fearing to lose any more time, Matney leaped into the saddle and urged his steed back to the spot where he had left Maura awaiting his coming.

He uttered the agreed-upon signal, and promptly the maiden came out from the bushes, to be caught around the waist by the sinewy arm of her lover and swung lightly upon the withers of the good horse.

"Father—where is he?" faltered Maura, as Matney gave the animal free rein and dashed rapidly down the valley.

He dared not respond just then, and though she repeated the question more than once, he maintained silence until a full mile away from the pocket. Then she cried, passionately:

"You have deceived me! You have deserted poor father!" and the poor child, half-crazed, tried to fling herself from the rapidly speeding steed.

CHAPTER XVII.

ELEPHANT TOM LAUGHS—AND CURSES

"STIR up the fire, lads—keep it blazing evenly, and see that no portion of this infernally obstinate pig is neglected. It's a gay old barbe-

cue, such as you don't often get a hack at, and you want to do yourselves proud!"

His evil eyes glowing like coals, his voice harsh and rasping, his stumpy fingers rubbing together, Elephant Tom uttered these rapid words, and saw his fiendish commands carried into effect by his too willing tools.

Savagely Horatio Adair glared back, great drops of sweat rolling down his temples as the heat increased beneath him. His body quivered with agony, his clothes were charred and smoking, tiny sparks of fire creeping here and there across the garments. His bodily torment must have been excruciating, but still he refused to give the signal of submission. His teeth were sunk deep into the suffocating gas. His finger nails were buried into the flesh of his palms. His bloodshot eyes seemed starting from their sockets. His thin face was drawn and distorted but when Elephant Tom drew still closer, looking eagerly for some signs of yielding, he glared savagely back, only kept from showering fierce curses upon the head of his cruel tormentor, by the contrivance that fettered his tongue.

"You're a gritty old fool, that's flat!" exclaimed Elephant Tom, unable longer to deny that tribute to the dogged resolution shown by the old man, though his own chagrin was so intense. "I'm almost sorry I undertook the job, but now I *have* started it, I'll carry it through, though it takes me a year and leaves you more like a bit o' overdone bacon than a human being!"

"Keep the fire low but steady, boys," he added, turning to his black-hoods. He's too valuable now to be burnt all up. So. Just sufficient to drive the heat further in. That is more painful than a scorching blaze. If he holds out five minutes longer, I'll be ready to wear that he's more devil than man!"

Elephant Tom stood motionless, closely watching the face of his victim. He was eager for the yielding, not only because so much money was at stake, but because he began to fear that the old man in his obstinacy would never yield until death came to end his sufferings. Even a brute can admire such extraordinary stoicism, and the regret expressed by the outlaw was perfectly genuine. But he felt his honor at stake, and was resolved to conquer or kill.

Torments beyond the power of pen to express, Horatio Adair endured in stubborn silence; but when he saw that his limits, and at length, with a smothered groan, he gave the long-expected signal of yielding, and with his own hands Elephant Tom severed the things that held him on the gridiron, and lifted him to the cool sward.

A low groan, as the gag was taken from his parted lips, then the old man swooned, lying like a log.

Cursing savagely, as he began to fear that he had done his own ends, Elephant Tom poured whisky down the old man's throat, and liberally bathed his temples with the same powerful liquid. For some minutes he despaired of success, but then Adair gave tokens of restoration, and shortly after his bloodshot eyes opened, to close again with a convulsive shudder as they fell upon that hideous mask bending over him.

"Good enough, old fellow!" chuckled Elephant Tom, drawing a long breath of relief. "Blessed if I didn't begin to think you had hopped the twig in dead earnest! I've two minds to double the ransom money, to pay for the trouble you've given us! It would serve you right, for a stubborn, unmannerly hog!"

"You've murdered me—isn't that enough?" gasped Adair, his eyes opening, his scorched body quivering with intense pain. "Kill me—death is preferable to such infernal torments as you are making me suffer!"

"You have only yourself to blame," coolly retorted the road-agent. "If you had written as I bade you, all this would have been spared you. You swore you wouldn't; I swore you should, and my power proved greater than your will. It took a wonderful sight of argument to convince you; that I'm free to admit. You endured enough to deserve receiving fifty thousand, instead of having to disgorge it; but that's the way luck runs in this wooden country."

While talking, Elephant Tom was not wholly idle. From an inner pocket of his thickly-padded costume he produced a note-book, pen, and bottle of ink.

"Here we are, my dear sir," he added, blandly, making a sign for two of the black-hoods to raise the tortured wretch to a sitting posture, and support him thus. "Oblige me by filling out that blank form. Make it payable to bearer."

Even then Horatio Adair hesitated, love of gold for the moment overpowering his bodily agony.

Elephant Tom grated, savagely:

"Write, curse you! Refuse now, and by all the powers of heaven and earth! I'll strap you on that gridiron again, and keep a slow fire burning beneath you from this until day—unless your covetous soul leaves your carcass before then!"

Horatio Adair shuddered with unutterable horror, and hesitated no longer. He took the

pen, and filled out the blank word by word as Elephant Tom dictated, then signed his name.

Taking the note, the road-agent closely scrutinized it. Then a low, mocking laugh escaped his lips, as he uttered:

"You are sure this document is strictly correct? It will be honored by your partners, when they realize your situation?"

"If not, can you blame me?" huskily muttered Adair. "They may decline to treat with you, as I warned you at first."

"Bah!" with a short, hard laugh. "You haven't had quite enough of our medicine. Stir up the fire, boys, and put the obstinate old fool back again for another dose."

"You promised to spare me if I wrote—"

"And I'll keep my word, when you keep yours," sharply. "You have omitted to mark that draft with your secret token that it is genuine. Add that, and be sure you make no further slip, or I'll clap you on that bed and keep you there until nothing short of Gabriel's trumpet can awaken you!"

With a despairing groan, Horatio Adair took back the paper and added the secret mark, Elephant Tom scrutinizing it minutely before finally expressing himself satisfied.

"All right, so far; but listen to me one moment. I'm chuck full of patience, but you've swallowed the last drop I have to spare. If you make any more trouble, I'll not stop to waste my breath on such a stubborn brute, but onto that gridiron you go, never to be lifted off alive. I swear that this is the last warning of any sort you'll receive from me. Unless you are longing for death, you'd best heed this in time, and govern yourself accordingly."

"You've got the note; what more do you demand?" sullenly.

"Merely a line or two by way of friendly introduction to my new bankers, your partners. We've had dealings with each other before this, though never face to face, and as it chanced that Elephant Tom always got just a trifle the best of the bargain, there may be some prejudice against me in their minds which might lead them to doubt my being your ambassador, unless duly provided with credentials. They might even call me a bald-faced swindler, and kick against honoring your draft."

"That's your lookout, not mine," muttered Adair, sullenly.

"Which is just where I beg leave to differ from you, my dear sir. My interest is purely pecuniary. Yours is a life-or-death interest. I mean to present this note for liquidation, just as soon as a good horse can carry me to Durango. I do not mean to leave town until the cash is paid over, if it takes a month's argument. But at the same time, if I fail to get back here by sunrise, to-morrow morning, my men have their instructions to return you to your little couch, and keep the fire stirred up so briskly that you won't need any blankets to keep you from having a chill—you understand?"

Horatio Adair, now that he had submitted to the worst, was not feeling strong enough to make much of a fight on any other point, and silently picked up the note-book and pen.

"Tell me what to write, and I'll do it. I want to live; life is very precious to me now."

Elephant Tom laughed carelessly, as he interpreted:

"So that you can be revenged upon me—exactly! Don't know as I blame you much, for I have given you a terribly rough old deal. When I finger that little old fifty thousand, I reckon our accounts will be pretty near squared. However, business is business, and you can't make good mince-pie out of empty words."

"Write as I dictate:

"ELEPHANT TOM'S MENAGERIE, }
"Tuesday, 10:30 P. M."

"AIKEN & BRANSCOMBE:—

"GENTLEMEN:—The bearer of this note of introduction, Elephant Tom, Esq., is well worthy all the kindness and courtesy you may have to spare. He has treated me with truly remarkable warmth; so much so that all I lack is a suit of pepper and salt to make me ready for the dining-table."

"As a feeble token of how thoroughly I appreciate his hospitality—for if ever tenderfoot was taken in and done for, I am that happy individual—I have given him a draft on you for fifty thousand dollars, which you will greatly oblige me by honoring without delay and charging same to my private account."

"I know this is short notice, but then the time of grace allowed me is still shorter. If Elephant Tom is not back here with the cash before sunrise in the morning you'll have to invest in crape, as well as a new sign-board."

"In short and not to put too fine a point on it, unless you pay the sum named as ransom money, Elephant Tom will kill me, and swears that my daughter, who is also in his power, shall suffer an even worse fate."

"I have the honor to remain, gentlemen,

"Yours, on the anxious seat,

"HORATIO ADAIR."

"If that don't fetch 'em, then I pity you," added Elephant Tom, with a short, mocking laugh, as he watched the prisoner write down the closing words. "For, sure as the Lord made little apples, I'll make my threat good, and when you're thoroughly done, I'll send your hard-hearted partners a bit of the roast, as a sample of my skill in the culinary art."

Horatio Adair made no response, though

there was death in the savage glance which he cast upon the exultant outlaw. A groan of agony, both bodily and mental, broke from his lips, as his head fell back, no longer supported by the black-hoods.

"One of you fellows trot out and get my horse ready for the road," said Elephant Tom, speaking hurriedly. "The rest of you pick him up and bring him over to where his daughter can look after him while I'm gone. Handle him carefully. I don't reckon his hide would take kindly to a curry-comb just now."

The black-hoods were prompt to obey, and Elephant Tom led the way to the spot where he expected to find Maura Adair under guard of the black-hood to whom he had confided her.

An impatient oath broke from his lips as he found the retreat empty; but before he could do or say more, a wild shout echoed faintly from the other side of the rock barrier, and back came the outlaw whom he had dispatched to prepare his horse, running like a frightened stag, straight into the bushes, his feet striking against the corpse of the road-agent slain by Albert Matney, casting him headlong at the feet of his chief, from whose lips burst a howling curse of commingled rage and surprise.

"What the deuce is the matter with you? What are you bowling about, anyway? Get up, and spit it out—lively!"

"Dandy Jim's out yender, dead—an' yer's another!" the road-agent gasped, scrambling to his feet, and holding back the bushes so that the moonlight fell full upon the ghastly, upturned countenance.

For an instant Elephant Tom stood as though petrified; but then he sprang into swift life and motion.

A sharp blast rung out from his dog-call, and jerking a revolver from his belt, he rushed at the head of his men to the tunnel. Through it he tore, only pausing when he reached the side of the dead sentinel.

A single glance showed him how the black-hood had met his death. The bloody stone spoke plainer than words. But it gave no clew to the slayer, other than explaining how the maiden had fallen into the hands of the unknown, doubtless disguised in the hood and shirt of the dead outlaw.

A fierce oath burst from his lips as he remembered the black-hood who had witnessed the barbecue, uninvited.

"And I gave her into his very hands, too!" he raged, his voice hardly recognizable in its mad fury. "Scatter, you infernal blood-hounds, and look for them! Kill 'em—recapture her, on your lives! If they get free, we're in a sweet box. Ha! who were acting as horse-guards? If they have so far neglected their duty—Cranky, watch the tunnel, and shoot any man who tries to come out! The rest follow me!"

Elephant Tom rushed toward the spot where the horses had been taken, a new fear assailing him. If the animals had been run off—He drew a long breath of relief as he caught the first glimpse of the animals, still tethered at the usual spot, for until then he had feared they were taken in a death-trap; that some cunning, relentless enemy had completely outwitted them, and was only waiting for a better chance to deal the finishing blow.

The next instant he caught sight of the two black-hoods, lying still and motionless in death, and now he comprehended why they had not given the alarm.

In grim silence he bent over them. A knife had cut short the thread of their lives, wielded by so strong and true a hand that apparently neither of the wretches had time to realize their peril before death claimed them for its own.

Elephant Tom arose and cast a swift, apprehensive glance around him, the words dropping mechanically from his lips:

"Can that demon have slipped his bonds and stolen here? It looks like it—and yet—"

"You devils, get to work!" he snarled, turning savagely on his men, who stood around, silent, awe-stricken at the sudden death which had overtaken so many of their comrades. "One of you rig up my horse and bring it to the tunnel. The rest come and beat the pocket. It hasn't been long since I gave the girl to that disguised demon, and they may not have had time to escape. Lively, you bloodhounds!"

Back to the tunnel hastened Elephant Tom, entering at the head of his men, placing two on guard at the inner portals, and bidding the remainder scatter through the pocket and thoroughly search every covert where it was possible for a living creature to lie concealed.

Most thoroughly his orders were obeyed, but, as the reader is aware, without success rewarding their efforts.

For a brief space he was satisfying himself that the unknown foe had indeed made his escape with Maura Adair. Elephant Tom stood in a quandary what *could* to pursue first. But his was a fertile and swiftly-working brain under pressure, and rapidly his orders were given to his fellows.

"Cranky and Sheeny Ike, take your horses and ride like the Old Boy was at your heels along the trail to Florida. If you overtake a

man with a woman, riding the stolen horse, kill him—kill her, if you can't take her alive!

"Six-toe and Speckled Paddy, get ready to ride with me along the Durango trail. The rest of you remain here. Keep close watch over the old man, two of you. The others must hold the tunnel until I come back, though an army try to force it.

"As for me I must get to Durango before that demon can, or all our work will go for nothing. Maybe we'll catch them on the road. If we do sight them, the boys sha'n't cross the range without company!"

He left the pocket, mounted, and dashed away at full speed down the valley, racing to win the fifty thousand dollars.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ELEPHANT TOM'S DOUBLE GAME.

DIRIGO BRANSCOMBE had changed his seat so that he faced the door of the office, and as he heard the sound of rapid footsteps, followed by a soft tapping on the panels, he arose and turning the key in the lock, opened the door and admitted the portly figure of his partner, Elias Aiken.

"What luck?" he demanded, hastily, his wolfish eyes all aglow as he closed the door again, in his excitement omitting to turn the key in the lock. "You found him? It's all right?"

Elias Aiken nodded silently, taking a seat at the table, and pouring out a stiff horn of brandy before speaking.

Foxy Branscombe seemed willing to let him take his time, after having received that one assurance, and silently imitated the liquidating example thus set.

"Well," at length uttered Aiken, setting his empty glass down with an emphatic thump on the table before him, staring intently into the bloodshot eyes of his partner. "Well, I don't know as I am any more thin-skinned than the average run of tough cases, but I do know that no single figure, with three naughts as a tail, would pay me for receiving the tongue-lashing Foxy Branscombe is getting this night in Durango!"

"From that devil, Tompoleon Tarbox, as he calls himself?"

"From the whole town, roughs as well as gentlemen," was the sullen response. "What in the foul fiend's name induced you to meddle with that Bretto girl?"

"That's my private affair, not partnership business."

"Then I wish you could pay the penalty out of your own private stock of popularity," growled Aiken. "It wouldn't take a nimble tongue half an hour to raise a mob out yonder to hoist you to the sign-post; and but a trifle more persuasion to add me as a make-weight!"

Foxy Branscombe laughed contemptuously.

"Bah! at one word from me the dogs would crouch and lick the very dust from my boots. I know them from a to a lizard. It's always the last speaker that carries their votes."

"You show your nose outside, and I'm betting big odds that those same dogs don't loosen their grip while there's a ghost of a kick in your carcass! You can't hear anything but curses against the rascal who dared insult Miss Naomi, and the way I was hustled about and elbowed while looking for your man, showed plain enough that the sentiment was not assumed."

"Never mind that now; it'll come out smooth enough, if we don't keep on stirring up the mud. You found him?"

"Tripphammer?—yes; and the scoundrel was one of the loudest of all in condemning your actions. Blessed if I could hardly keep my fingers from his throat as I heard him howling out so savagely."

"More to ward suspicion from himself than through any excess of honesty," laughed Foxy Branscombe. "I'm rather glad the shrewd rascal took that role, for nobody'll be apt to suspect him of acting in my interests when the clap comes."

"You made the pass, of course? He did not catch you?"

"No; it was easy enough to do the trick in the crowd, and when he got a chance to divine what was up, I was out of his range, and doubt whether he clapped eyes on me at all."

"You're sure he comprehended? He found the note?"

"I knew you'd be particular, so I followed and watched him from a safe distance. At first glance I saw that he suspected something of what was up, for he held tight to the pocket into which I had slipped the package without attempting to draw it forth, making his way out of the crowd. He stopped in the light from a saloon window and opened the paper. I saw him read it, count the notes, and then, as he glanced around him, I gave a slight whistle to draw his attention, and as he looked toward where I was hidden in the shadows, I disguised my voice and squeaked out: 'Follow orders or hang!'"

"What did he do—what did he say?"

"Nodded his head, then tapped the hilt of his knife. I didn't wait for anything more, but stole away and made my way here, first dodging about enough to make sure he was not

dogging me to discover who gave him that warning."

"Good enough, old fellow—"

"So I say! Good enough, and good-evening with it!"

Sharp and distinct the words rung out, but they came from neither of the two partners; and with cries of angry amazement they turned to behold the frowning muzzles of a brace of revolvers, whose butts were gripped by the hands of a personage whose identity could by no possibility be mistaken.

"Elephant Tom, by the Eternal!" gasped Branscombe, pushing back his chair and half-arising, only to sink back as the notorious road-agent menacingly uttered:

"Go slow, my blooming daisy! And you, too, Fatty Aiken, unless you're anxious to blow your own brains out. Keep your seats, gentlemen, I beg. I'm the most unceremonious cuss you ever met, and would rather help myself than to be waited upon."

As he spoke, Elephant Tom, with a dexterous twirl of one foot, brought a chair near enough for him to drop into it, without shifting the aim of his pistols.

"What the devil do you want here?" growled Branscombe.

"That's right, Foxy," with an approving nod. "Don't varnish your words when talking to yours truly. Only you make a trifling mistake; it's not the devil, but two of them I want—and their first initials are Foxy Branscombe and Elias Aiken!"

As he spoke, Elephant Tom hitched the heels of his boots over the top round to his chair, and supported his elbows on his elevated knees, thus holding his weapons at a level, without fatiguing his muscles.

"If it's robbery you're intending, you'll miss your game this time," growled Branscombe. "There's not twenty dollars about the place, unless it's in your clothes."

"So much the worse for you two sweet-scented daisies," was the careless response, as the road agent squinted over the leveled tubes. "I've called for cash, and cash I'm bound to have. You know my password:—Your gold-dust or your life!"

"It won't work here," snarled Foxy Branscombe. "You dare not burn powder, for that would bring the whole town about your ears. You can't get away with us both, unless you do shoot. So, what're you going to do about it?"

"Sink a mineral shaft into the first one of you that makes a crooked move. Chew on that warning while I fish out a little document for your careful consideration," coolly retorted Elephant Tom, lowering his left hand and placing the revolver in his lap, keeping the other weapon at a level, while taking a folded paper from his breast and tossing it so that it fell upon the table between the partners.

"You needn't be so particular," he laughed, as the men eyed the paper suspiciously. "It's not an infernal machine, though I reckon there'll be a bit of an explosion when you come to digest the contents. Open it, Foxy Branscombe."

Mechanically the speculator obeyed, but as his keen eyes took in its purport, he gave vent to an angry snort.

"It's a forgery—a lie on its very face!"

"I want to know," ejaculated Elephant Tom, in mock surprise. "Well, now, I didn't think that of old Adair—after I'd treated him so warmly, too! The tricky old scoundrel!"

"You never saw him. He's in Denver. It's a trick to extort money from us—but you'll have your trouble for your pains. Bah! did you take us for purblind idiots?"

A sudden and complete change came over the outlaw. His air of mockery gave way to one of stern decision.

"That will do. Drop idle chaff and come down to solid business. Look at that note carefully. The signature is genuine. The draft bears, in addition, the secret mark which is used in your firm to guard against forgery. Look closely and you will see as much for yourself."

Aiken caught up the note and held it close to the light. An ashen shade crept over his countenance as his eyes met the gaze of his partner, for he saw that Elephant Tom spoke true.

The road-agent nodded approvingly as he spoke again:

"I see you recognize it. All right. Nothing remains but for you to settle the demand. I prefer cash, if you please. A check would have to be collected, and I don't care about taking all that trouble—not to mention the risk."

"If Horatio Adair wrote this, it was through illegal compulsion. He'd rather die than part with any such sum!"

"Any ordinary death, I admit," laughed Elephant Tom. "But I tried a patent persuasive of my own, with the result you see before you. Read his note, and you'll understand better."

"It's all a muddle!" growled Branscombe, tossing the note across to his partner. "How did he come out here, and into your clutches? He never spoke of coming when he last wrote."

"Yet he came in answer to a telegram from you—"

"We never sent him a dispatch!"

"I did, in your name, and it answered quite

as well. I told him things were going to eternal smash, and the only hope of saving anything from the wreck, was for him to lose no time in getting on the ground. He came. I wrecked the train at the Rio Florida crossing. I took him and his daughter prisoners, and conveyed them to a little summer-palace of mine in the hills. I argued the case with him—using a little fire by way of a clincher—and as a result he made me a present of that draft on his partners. He wrote that note to introduce me to your favorable consideration. I deliver it, and all you have to do is to fork over the cash it calls for."

"If we refuse to meet your outrageous demands?"

"Then I'll be put to the trouble of making an extra trip back and forth. I'll fetch with me an ear or two—maybe a scalp. In short, gentlemen, you'll pay me over fifty thousand dollars, or Horatio Adair will die such a death of torture as no poor devil yet experienced!"

"If we pay, you'll set him free?" hesitated Branscombe.

"I've made all arrangements with him. You have only to say if that draft is genuine. If so, pay it."

"It'll have to be by check, then," interposed Aiken. "We haven't any such sum in cash—"

"You lie!" snarled Elephant Tom, savagely, throwing aside all outward smoothness in his impatience. "You have the cash, in yonder safe. I'll give you just two minutes in which to decide. If, at the end of that time, you still hang out, I swear by all the powers of heaven and earth, I'll kill you like I would a couple of mad-dogs! Time!"

"It's genuine," muttered Branscombe, to his partner. "Adair can't kick if we pay it for him, and we can keep his note and the draft as proof that we're not to blame."

"Time's up, gentlemen!" warned Elephant Tom. "What is your decision? Is it cash, or am I to lay you out for the coroner? Come, I'm in a hurry!"

"We'll pay, if you promise to leave us the draft and note as proof that we could not do otherwise."

"That as a matter of course," was the prompt reply. "You can frame and glaze them, as mementoes of this pleasant little interview, for what I care. The dust is all I want."

"Open the safe and get it, Aiken," muttered Branscombe.

His partner obeyed, covering the opening as well as he could with his massive form, closing and locking the door ere he turned around with a package of bills in his hands.

"Take your seat at the table, ordered Elephant Tom. "Open the package, and hold each bill up so that I can see the denomination. You fellows are too tricky for an honest man like me to throw away a single chance. Smartly, now!"

In grum silence Aiken obeyed, Elephant Tom summing up the whole, with a grim laugh of satisfaction.

"Slip the rubber band back again and toss it here. Sol! The documents are yours, and tomorrow you shall have the exquisite pleasure of meeting your partner and listening to him go into raptures over the warm hospitality he met with at the hands of the man people curse up hill and down as a conscienceless scoundrel—Elephant Tom!"

"Good-by, then," growled Branscombe, savagely. "You know how you came in; you can find your way out by the same passage."

"In a hurry, ain't you?" sneered Elephant Tom, stowing the package of bills away, but not offering to arise. "Fact is, I haven't quite concluded my business—"

"We've met your infamous demands. What more do you ask?"

"Your contribution to my little private fund."

"What do you mean?"

"Business, chuck up! Elephant Tom has had his say; now we'll change the programme a trifle. That was ransom money; this is payment for the claim you stole from George Brent!"

As he spoke, the left hand of the road agent was busy at the back of his head, and with his last word his hat fell off, his hideous mask fell forward upon his bosom and revealed his darkly handsome countenance.

"Rebel George, by the Eternal!" cried Branscombe, while Elias Aiken stared at the revelation with protruding eyes and open mouth, too amazed to utter more than a gasping groan.

"Or George Brent, the man whom you three scoundrels bled so freely years ago—the man whom you cast into prison by perjury your souls so blackly that Satan himself would blush to acknowledge you as his pupils—the man who has watched and waited for this opportunity to strike back a blow for revenge, where you will feel it the most severely—in your pockets!" sternly uttered the road-agent, his dark eyes all ablaze, his white teeth showing viciously below his mustache.

"George Brent is dead," suddenly muttered Branscombe, his eyes drooping, as though unable to long encounter that keen, menacing gaze. "But even if he lived, and you

were he, you can have no just claim upon us. We have the papers to show that our dealings with him were on the square. The records of the court in which he was tried and found guilty of attempted robbery and murder are still in existence."

A short, mocking laugh burst from the lips of the outlaw, as he quickly replaced and secured his mask, all the time keeping the two men covered with his pistols.

"Lies, false as yourself! But even granting all that you claim, the only law I now acknowledge is that of my own sweet will. I have you foul. A simple crook of my finger will send you to the devil, your master. I say that you wronged me most foully. I demand repayment, in part, for my loss, my wrongful conviction, my sufferings in that living hell, the life you are the prime cause of my leading, ever since I came into the world again."

"Pay me \$25,000 each, and I will spare your lives. Refuse, and I'll kill you first, then empty your safe—"

"It is empty!" hastily interposed Aiken. "You took the last dollar it contained as ransom for old Adair."

"Another lie," coldly retorted Elephant Tom. "That safe contains at least fifty thousand dollars more. You drew the hundred thousand, to close the bargain for three mines owned by Stafford Lansing. He was to meet you this evening, to turn over the title-deeds and patents, but failed—just why, a few of my boys can explain."

"Come! Will you fork over, or shall I shoot?"

There was deadly earnestness in his words, and the two men dared no longer hesitate. Suddenly the safe was opened and the money produced. This time Elephant Tom took the amount for granted, seemingly to avoid further loss of time.

"Down flat on the floor, Foxy Branscombe!" he ordered, sternly. "Hesitate, and I'll lay you out for the coroner. So!" as the speculator obeyed, with a groan. "Tie him with these thongs, and do the job up in style, or I'll riddle you, sure!"

He tossed a handful of hemp thongs to Aiken, forcing him at the muzzle of his pistol, to bind his partner. When this was done to his satisfaction, he made Aiken lie flat on his face, and secured him after the same fashion.

"Some of your friends will drop in to see what's become of you, in the course of a week or two," he laughed, producing a couple of stout gags, and forcing their jaws open, he completed his work with rare dexterity.

"When people ask how came you so, tell 'em that Elephant Tom tackled you with his whole menagerie. That will spare your reputation for bravery. Ta-ta, gents! I'll see you later!"

With a mocking laugh, the bold outlaw left the office.

CHAPTER XIX.

SPEEDING TO THE RESCUE.

FOR the moment, Maura Adair was almost beside herself, and hardly accountable for what she did or said. She had undergone so much that night, had suffered so intensely in mind, more for her father than on her own account, that her poor brain was well-nigh distracted.

"Let me go!" she cried, seeking to tear herself free from the strong arms that grasped her tightly. "You have deceived me! You swore that you were taking me to father, whom you had rescued from those demons! You—whom I loved, almost deified—lied to me! Basely lied! And now you add insult to injury by keeping me from going back to share the fate of poor father! Let me go, I say—let me go!"

So desperately did she struggle to release herself, that Albert Matney was forced to turn aside from the regular trail and draw rein, fearing lest she do herself some injury, if, indeed, she did not cause them both to fall from the snorting, prancing horse, frightened at the wild cries and struggles on its back.

Matney dismounted and flung the bridle-reins over a convenient point of rock, his strong left arm tightly grasping the trembling figure of the nearly distracted maiden.

Though each word uttered by Maura cut him to the heart, with a far keener pang than knife-thrust could have inflicted, he gave no outward token of this, his voice being calm and steady, firm, yet almost paternal in its resolution:

"Maura, child, you know not what you are saying. If I have deceived you, it is only for your own good. In your half-distracted state, I knew you would not listen to me, unless I made use of some such ruse; and when you have fully recovered your senses, you will thank me for the little deception."

"Take me to father," moaned the maiden, apparently not comprehending, even if she heard his words. "You promised me you would take me to him!"

"I said I would reunite him and you, or lose my life in the attempt, and now I repeat that oath, Maura. But you are seriously lessening his chances of escaping with life, by your very foolish actions now."

"Try and collect your thoughts. You fail to understand my words, even yet. Maura, I beg

you—by the love we bear each other—to try and comprehend what I am saying."

Rapidly, earnestly he spoke, but the poor girl still trembled like a leaf in his warm embrace. Those terrible threats of the road-agent, coupled with the horrible torture which she beheld her only parent suffering, had completely unnerved her, and Albert Matney really began to fear that her brain had entirely given way beneath the shock.

For a moment or two he stood in doubt what course to pursue. Time was very precious. Even if their escape and flight had not ere this been discovered by Elephant Tom and his merciless myrmidons, it could not be long delayed, and then there would be swift and persistent pursuit.

He wished to reach the station where the passengers had left the train before they could be transferred across the river to take a train from Durango, should such be sent for their accommodation. From their number he hoped to gather a force of volunteers sufficiently strong to cope successfully with the gang of outlaws, and to release Horatio Adair from their merciless clutches.

But to do this he required all of his natural acuteness, since he had never passed over the trail but that once, and it would be only too easy for him to go astray, especially were he compelled to restrain Maura by actual force.

He bent his head, no longer hidden in that bloody hood, and pressed his lips to hers, not once, but repeatedly. Between the warm caresses he whispered rapid words, endearing terms, passionate vows, such as had marked the first victory of love, the first moments of ecstatic bliss which had followed her sweet confession in far-away Denver.

It was love's inspiration, but it proved successful far beyond his most sanguine hopes.

For a brief space Maura struggled to free herself, but then her violent trembling grew less and less, and Matney could see that the wild light in her eyes was softening; and then, with an hysterical burst of tears, her head sunk upon his bosom, and he knew that the victory was won.

"Maura, my precious, listen to me," he said, hurriedly but gently, smoothing her hot, throbbing brows with his cool palm. "If I used deception it was for your own good, as well as for the good of your father. I, alone, could serve him, but I could do nothing by open force against so many armed, reckless men. The only hope of rescuing him lay in seeking aid outside. I dared not leave you there, at the mercy of that diabolical ruffian, after the foul threats he uttered. I knew that your poor brain was too hot to listen to the voice of reason, and so I had to deceive you, for your own good."

"Poor father—they will murder him!"

"Not so, dear. They will force him to sign the draft for the ransom money, and then he will be out of danger until the blood-money is collected. Long before that time, I hope to have him safe out of his clutches. I will get aid at the station where we left the train, and hasten back—"

"Then do not delay! Hasten—if you love me, Albert, do not lose another moment!" cried Maura, hysterically.

Matney was too much pleased at winning his point, to remind her that whatever delay had occurred was owing wholly to her mad opposition.

"Tear off this hideous disguise, since it has served its purpose," he said, aiding her to remove the garments his good knife and strong right arm had won. "Now, dear one, we'll try to make up for lost time."

He took the reins, vaulted lightly into the saddle, and stooping over, passed an arm around her waist and swung her gently to the croup behind him.

"Clasp me around the waist, Maura. That will leave my hands free to use my weapons, should any occasion arise. So!"

Once more they dashed along through the moonlight, through the shadows, past clumps of bushes and scattered rocks, Matney anxiously scanning the landmarks before and around him, knowing that success depended upon his not going astray, thus losing precious time.

Luckily his bump of locality was strong, and at length he dashed out into the main road, and with a far lighter heart urged his good horse on toward Florida, where they had taken the old stage early in the evening.

Through the little camp he dashed, without drawing rein, well knowing that he could procure no aid there, or short of the station where they had parted with so many of their fellow-passengers of the almost wrecked train.

Without a pause the good horse carried its double burden over those five weary miles, and a glad cry escaped the lips of Albert Matney as he caught sight of the dark figures that flocked out of the blood-stained station at the sound of rapidly beating hoofs. Thank heaven! they were still there!

It was well that the race was no longer, for as Matney dismounted, bearing the nearly senseless form of Maura Adair in his arms, the good horse staggered and only kept itself from

dropping in its tracks, by spreading its feet widely. Another mile at that reckless pace, and it would have dropped dead in the harness.

Surrounded by the eager crowd, pelted from all sides with curious questions, Matney pushed his way through to the station, carrying Maura in his arms, only pausing when he could resign his precious charge to the tender care of several ladies who were among the passengers.

Satisfied that her wants would be well cared for, he left her thus, emerging from the building, and speaking loudly.

In as few words as possible, he gave a sketch of what had befallen them since their departure on their way to Durango, his clear voice rising louder to overcome the indignant exclamations which burst from his audience.

"As fellow-men I appeal to you!" he cried, in conclusion. "I ask you for aid, to rescue a gentleman from the merciless grip of these devils in human form. If not for his sake, for that of his nearly distracted daughter, whose poor brain has very nearly given way beneath the terrible shock of beholding the cruel torture of her only parent. In her name, I ask you to follow my lead, to rescue him, to punish those bloody scoundrels!"

There was no need for him to say more. Maura came out of the station, and in a voice that trembled so that her words could hardly be distinguished, begged them to go to the aid of her father. They were men who listened, and however the fiery eloquence of Matney might have affected them, they could not resist that pale face, those burning tears and sob-choked voice. With one accord they volunteered, and demanded that not a moment be lost.

Right willingly Albert Matney led them, making all possible haste over the intricate, rocky trail, fearing lest, after all, they would be too late to rescue the prisoner, for he hardly dared hope that the road-agents had kept him in the pocket, after what had occurred.

With eager haste they pressed along, pausing for nothing, and the vicinity of the pocket was reached while yet the dawn was lacking, though the morning star was riding high in the heavens, and all knew that soon the gray light would redden and grow brighter as the sun came up.

Albert Matney left his men behind, pressing stealthily forward to reconnoiter, but in his eagerness he so far exposed himself as to draw a shot from the road-agents who guarded the tunnel entrance to the pocket.

Hastily he fell back, a drop or two of blood trickling from his cheek, where the spiteful lead had just broken the skin; but he was more than content, and his main object was gained at slight expense.

"The rascals are there," he said, in hasty explanation, as he reached his companions. "It is almost certain that they have not removed Mr. Adair, as I feared they would. If they had done so, the entire band would have gone with him."

"We outnumber the rascals; let's close in and settle the affair off-hand," uttered one impetuous fellow.

"No," calmly returned Matney. "They have a strong position, and could defeat double our force, if we only attacked them from the front. Even if we succeeded in carrying the tunnel, it would be at a serious loss, and I'd rather let them go scot-free than to lose one honest man."

"But we've got to fight them! They won't give up the old gentleman until we compel them, and I've no hankering to return to that little woman without her father."

"Nor will I," even more quietly. "I think we can circumvent the rascals, if you will only consent to be guided by me."

"Just so there isn't any flunking"—bluntly.

"There will not be, on my part," laughed Matney, pleased by the plain earnestness of his follower. "I can lead half a dozen good men around to take the rascals in the rear, if the rest of you will only keep them amused from this side."

"Tell us what to do, and we'll do it, bet your sweet life!"

"Good enough; but I want you to bear me company. There'll be a fair chance for hard knocks, and I like your blunt ways."

In a few hasty words Matney explained the plans he had formed. Remembering his crawling along the ledge, by means of which he had been enabled to slay the sentinel, he felt sure he could guide a small force of men into the pocket, by taking that same course, provided the rest would attract and hold the attention of the outlaws, by a series of feints and false attacks from the level in front.

As soon as this plan was fully comprehended the volunteers promptly accepted it, and selecting his men, giving the remainder their orders, Matney led them along to the ledge, and began his portion of the task.

It was extremely perilous, at first, since, only for the shadows, they would have been in plain view from the tunnel entrance on several occasions, as they crawled along the narrow ledge; but their comrades below, played their part to perfection, sending bullet after bullet into the leafy screen, shouting and cheering, making short erratic rushes, which drew lasty

from the enemy, and served the purpose of keeping their eyes at a level, instead of above it.

At length the most critical portion of the aerial route was passed over, and Matney led the way at greater speed, soon crossing the rocky bridge above the tunnel, and beginning the descent on the other side.

It was just at that moment, when success seemed fully assured, that a wild, horrible screech arose from the gloomy pocket, startling them so that they involuntarily paused, with boding glances at each other. The same thought struck them, one and all: that Horatio Adair was being murdered by the outlaws, fearing his rescue!

For a brief space they remained more like petrified images than living, breathing men.

"Help! treachery!"

Shrill and piercing rose the words, coming from the same point from whence the screech had sounded, the last word dying away in a smothered howl that was more like the cry of a wild beast in its death-agony, than aught human.

Angry yells came from the tunnel beneath them, and these sounds aroused Matney. Casting off his momentary stupor, he cried aloud:

"Now's our time! Close in, lads! Strike hard and fast!"

Recklessly he leaped down the rocks, closely followed by his men, yelling loudly, defiantly, as they saw the startled road-agents flocking out from the tunnel.

And then the swift reports of pistols rent the air.

CHAPTER XX.

MAN'S INGRATITUDE TO MAN.

HORATIO ADAIR lay in sullen silence, still bound hand and foot, near the upper end of the pocket. The pain of his extensive burns prevented him from even thinking of slumber, while fierce and bitter reflections kept his brain on the rack.

He knew that his daughter had succeeded in making her escape from the pocket, in some mysterious manner, and he believed she had thus far eluded all pursuit. At the first, his suspicious, cross-grained brain had jealously regarded the alarm and consequent excitement among the outlaws, as only a part of the deep-laid plans of Elephant Tom, who through these tactics hoped to keep a tight grip on his purse-strings. But not for long. The dead men who were brought into the pocket, four in all, with the excited mutterings of the road-agents after Elephant Tom had taken his departure in such haste, banished these suspicions, and his fears for his child were somewhat relieved.

This left him more time for pondering over his own situation, counting the odds for and against his escape from the hands of George Brent with life and limb.

One of the black hoods was constantly beside him, with a comrade never far away, in accordance with the instructions left by Elephant Tom, and thus it was when the first rifle-shot rung out on the early morning air, as the watchful road-agents on duty at the mouth of the tunnel, caught a glimpse of Albert Matney as he scouted around to ascertain whether or no they had taken the alarm and flight at the same time.

At almost the same instant, Horatio Adair had made a curious discovery, that caused him to start and utter a little exclamation of surprise. His guard misunderstood the cause, and while his fellow hastened to find out what had occasioned the shot, he growled:

"It won't do you no good, old codger, even ef that powder-burnin' was caused by your friends. I've got my orders, an' I'll stop your brains all over a quarter-section afore runnin' any resk o' your gittin' away—mind that, now!"

Horatio Adair made no reply, but lay motionless, his half-closed eyes riveted upon a certain portion of the rocks above, where he could have taken oath he beheld the figure of a human being appear and then as suddenly vanish.

The second guard came back with his report, and the heart of the prisoner throbbed high with renewed hope. If enemies to the road-agents, they must be friendly to him. If attacked in front, might not that shadowy form be one of a party detailed to take the enemy by surprise from the rear?

The two road-agents stood near him, but with their backs turned, gazing toward the tunnel, muttering in low tones as the sounds of firing grew more frequent, evidently longing to join their fellows, yet afraid to neglect the duty imposed on them by their dreaded chief.

Horatio Adair sunk his teeth deep into his lip to smother the glad cry which rose in his throat as he saw that shadow on the rocks once more—this time so clearly that he could no longer entertain a shade of doubt. It was a man, and one who was trying to enter the pocket unseen, unheard!

With emotions which may be better imagined than described, the captive watched his movements.

Down the rocks stole the phantom-like figure, not a sound betraying its progress, even to the

painfully acute senses of Horatio Adair. Bit by bit the difficult trail was conquered. Lower and lower the shadow descended, until there was only a smooth, upright wall of rock a dozen feet high, where a cat could not have gained a foothold.

As he watched, Horatio Adair saw the unknown fasten a rope around a projecting point of rock, then drop the other end down into the pocket. A moment later he swung himself over the wall and came sliding slowly down. Only a few feet; then some portion of his garments appeared to catch on a projecting spur, and he loosened one hand from the rope to free himself—only to have his hold break loose, and himself fall heavily, awkwardly to the ground.

The sound of this fall startled the road-agents on guard over the prisoner, and they suddenly turned in that direction, barely in time to see the bold stranger recover his footing and leap upon them, a bare blade flashing in his hand.

Taken so completely by surprise, the nearest outlaw felt that deadly weapon tearing through flesh and bone, deep down into his heart, before a cry could escape his lips or his hand seek a weapon in self-defense.

From his lips came that horrible screech of agony which so startled the party of rescuers led by Albert Matney along the narrow ledge, but he himself was hardly aware of having uttered it. His heart cloven in twain, he reeled back and fell dead ere his body fairly touched the ground.

"Help! Treachery!" yelled the second guard, leaping back and drawing a revolver to defend himself.

His heel tripped against a root, and as he fell backward his weapon exploded harmlessly, sending its lead to scar the face of the rocks above. Before he could recover from the unexpected shock sufficiently to arise, or cock his pistol, the left hand of the unknown shot out and a bright glare lit up the gloom for an instant—a sharp report—and with bullet-pierced brain the road-agent sunk back in the silent throes of death.

With wild yells the outlaws came rushing into the pocket, leaving the tunnel unguarded in their confused surprise.

The unknown heard them, saw them, and, stooping, he caught up the bound form of Horatio Adair, slinging it over his shoulders with an ease that was remarkable in one of his size and build, then sprung to the rock wall and grasped the depending rope, drawing himself up the face for a few feet—only to fall back as the point of rock gave way beneath the strain of their united weight.

A groan of pain and despair escaped the lips of the old man as he heavily struck the ground. Cat-like, his rescuer regained his feet and glanced toward the yelling outlaws.

They were too near for him to think of flight or hiding. Already they had sighted him, and were playing their pistols with dangerous rapidity.

He stooped and caught Horatio Adair up in his arms, tossing him into the densest bushes near by, then faced the yelling cursing road-agents, both hands gripping revolvers.

Like one prolonged echo they spoke. In twin spouts of flame-tinged smoke, the stinging lead was vomited from their hollow muzzles. The yells of rage were changed to cries and groans of pain, and those of the band who had as yet escaped death or wounds, faltered—cowed by one man.

Then, with wild cheers, Albert Matney and his gallant little band of volunteers burst upon their rear. Through the tunnel came the remainder of the rescuing party, adding their shouts and their bullets to the mad tumult.

Taken in face and flank, with full two-thirds of their number prostrate in death or wounded too badly to do more than groan and beg for the mercy they had so seldom shown to others, the road-agents lost what little presence of mind that unexpected attack in the rear had left them, and instead of closing up back to back, they broke and sought safety in mad flight, where flight was impracticable.

"Give all quarter who drop their weapons and beg for mercy!" cried Albert Matney, even as he ducked swiftly to avoid a pistol-shot from a cornered ruffian, then leaped in and brought him to the earth, bleeding, senseless, with one crushing blow from his clubbed revolver.

The road-agents heard and understood his cry. They saw that there was no chance for either fight or flight, for the volunteers cut them off from the tunnel, and there was no time for picking out a trail over the nearly perpendicular rocks.

"We knuckle—give us a show!" cried the one among them who appeared a sort of chief during the absence of Elephant Tom. "Don't chug a man when he's down!"

Some of the volunteers were not so easy to choke off, now that they had fairly gotten scent of blood, and none are so ferocious as novices whose first fight has been nothing but a straight rush on to victory, without the scales hanging an instant in doubt which side to favor. But Matney was ably seconded by others, among whom the unknown stood conspicuous, and five minutes after that wild yell rung out upon the

startled silence, the last surviving outlaw was bound hand and foot.

"Mr. Adair! Horatio Adair!" shouted Matney, as soon as he felt assured the victory was won and all danger at an end.

"If you mean the old gent those imps had in limbo a bit ago, you'll find him in the brush yonder, where I tossed him to get him out of the way," uttered a voice at the young man's elbow. "But what name did you call him?"

Matney did not wait to hear the question, but darted to the point indicated by the unknown, stooping and pulling Horatio Adair out of the bushes into the moonlight so he could see how to sever his tightly-drawn bonds.

He raised the thin form in his arms—for the speculator seemed unable to stand alone—but then came a sudden and startling change.

With a cursing snarl of insane fury Horatio Adair jerked a revolver from the hip of his secretary, and thrusting it almost into the face of the man who had accompanied Matney, pulled trigger.

Matney struck up his arm, and barely in time, for the lead tore its way through the hair of the man, who staggered back, blinded by the flash.

"Good Heavens! would you murder the man who risked his life to save yours?" cried Matney, grappling with the old man and wrestling the weapon from his frenzied grasp.

"It's Elephant Tom! May the fires of hell forever blast him!" snarled Horatio Adair, madly striving to free himself. "Let me free, you cur! I'll kill him—kill him by inches, even as he tortured me! It's that hell-hound, Elephant Tom!"

"There's gratitude for you!" uttered the stranger, with a short, hard laugh as he wiped his dazzled eyes. "I saved the old fool, when the two men guarding him swore they would blow his brains out the very moment there came a ghost of a chance for his being rescued. I nearly broke my neck tumbling down those rocks. I wasted a lot of good cartridges. And all for what? To save an infernal liar, thief and general scoundrel, to curse the world with his polluting presence! I deserve to have my brains blown out—but not by his hands!"

"Rebel George!" cried Matney, in surprise.

"Elephant Tom, I tell you!" frothed Horatio Adair, all physical weakness forgotten as he beheld the well-remembered face of his hated enemy.

"Well, you have got a cheek onto you!" ejaculated the man who had so opportunely made his appearance on the scene. "The old boy a minute ago, and now Elephant Tom! What next?"

With a soothing voice Matney tightened his grasp upon the arm of the speculator, and held him back.

"There must be some woeful mistake, Mr. Adair. This is the gentleman who risked his life to rescue you from the power of these merciless demons. Only for his prompt action and dauntless bravery, we would have arrived too late to save you. You would have been murdered by your guards—"

"Placed over me by that man!" snarled the speculator.

"It is the gentleman who saved the train from being wrecked!" ejaculated one of the volunteers. "The same who gave his name as Rebel George Bretto—who accompanied you from the station—"

"What train? What station?" demanded the man, sharply. "What sort of a menagerie is this I've got into, anyhow? If it isn't a lunatic asylum broke loose, then I'll pass for good!"

Albert Matney turned sharply upon him, demanding:

"You don't deny it? Your name is George Bretto?"

"I don't deny that much, certainly. I am George Bretto. But when you come to howling about wrecking trains and Elephant Tom's, and all that rot, then I can't follow suit, and you can't growl if I use my trumps and nail the lie."

"You don't mean to say that you never saved our train from being wrecked by Elephant Tom, last evening?"

"But I do say just that," was the cool response.

"You never led us—Mr. Adair, his daughter and myself—from the station to Florida, there to take a coach for Durango? You were not with us when Elephant Tom held us up?"

"Not guilty of either of the counts, me noble lud!" and Rebel George bowed with mock humility—only to draw his lithe figure proudly erect, his dark eyes flashing with growing anger, his voice ringing out sharp and clear:

"If you gents have played this little farce long enough to take the edge off, suppose you tell me what in blazes you are trying to get through you, anyway?"

"You are Elephant Tom!" hoarsely cried Adair. "You drew us into ambush by playing a part with satanic cunning. You tortured me with fire until you made me sign a draft for fifty thousand dollars, as ransom money. I charge you with all this—and more! You murdered the man who was driving the stage! Matney, I order you to arrest that scoundrel!"

Rebel George leaped back a pace, and his revolvers appeared in his hands with magic celerity.

"Go a little slow, gentlemen!" he cried, warningly. "You're a crowd, but I'm an army, when I'm crowded too hard!"

Matney raised his empty hand imperiously, his voice cold and commanding as he spoke:

"Put up your weapons, Mr. Bretto. If you are innocent of the crimes charged against you, you have nothing to fear. If you are guilty, fighting can't do you any good, for, since matters have gone so far, this affair has got to be cleared up, and by showing fight you'll only force us to take you!"

"Which might not be so easily done," with a short, hard laugh. "Still you talk like a white man, and as long as you treat me like another, I'll argue the case with you."

Horatio Adair was not satisfied with this aspect, particularly as Rebel George declined to give up his arms, but Matney managed to silence him on that point, and with the volunteers gathered around, he told his strange story, to which none present listened with closer interest than the accused.

It was clear to all that Adair uttered nothing more than what he himself implicitly believed, and many were the black, menacing glances which his auditors turned upon the dark-featured sport during his recital.

"You have heard the charges brought against you," said Matney gravely. "What have you to say in reply?"

"Not much, other than to say that yonder old fellow is either mad or lies. I never saw the train you came on. I did not save it from being wrecked. I was not one of you when you were held up by Elephant Tom and his gang. I did not bring him and his daughter here as prisoners. I did not tell him I only assumed the disguise of Elephant Tom, to obtain revenge on him, for I never had the rig on in my life. I did not torture him by fire, though I could have done so, with a good grace, and no white man could blame me after hearing how he and his mates, Foxy Branscombe and Elias Aiken, treated me in the days gone by. That part of the story, he took good care not to tell you!"

"Yet I can take my oath you were the man who saved the train!" ejaculated Matney. "And so can these gentlemen."

Promptly his last words were confirmed, but Rebel George never flinched at the harsh words in which that assent was couched, and coolly as ever, he cried:

"Then you one and all swear to a lie! Call up any one of those road-agents, and ask them if I am their leader."

At a motion from Matney, one of the prisoners was brought forward and held so he could look full into the other's face.

"You have seen Elephant Tom without his mask?" asked Matney, and as the outlaw nodded, he added:

"Who is the man? Take time, and make no mistake."

"It's the boss—Elephant Tom!" was the instant reply.

Rebel George was about to reply, when half a dozen stout fellows leaped upon him, bearing him to the ground, disarming and binding him hand and foot, despite his vigorous resistance.

"Now, you bloodhound, it's my turn!" hissed Horatio Adair.

CHAPTER XXI.

KALEIDOSCOPIIC CHANGES.

INTENSE excitement reigned throughout Durango. Her rough-and-ready citizens gathered in knots, eagerly talking all in the same breath, only to break away and go through the same performance elsewhere; filling the air with the wildest rumors, and each man seeming to vie with his fellows in circulating the most extraordinary accounts of what had and what was yet to occur.

The general drift was toward the office of a certain judge named Brennan, from which it flowed on to a long, low building used as a saloon and dance-hall, but which had for this particular occasion been appropriated for a more respectable entertainment, the preliminary examination of Elephant Tom and his road-agents.

Albert Matney and his volunteers had brought their prisoners into town with no little caution, and had them safely stowed away before the truth got wind. Who first made the discovery, it would be difficult to say, but it was made, and like wildfire the report spread over town and into the neighboring mines, from whence the honest diggers flocked in eager haste to witness the fun, and perhaps lend a hand in the lynching bee which was almost certain to follow.

A little to their dissatisfaction, perhaps, they soon found out that matters were to be conducted with a little regard for legal forms. There were steady hands pulling the strings, and those who tried to talk up a mob, quickly found it of very little avail.

The improvised court-room was closely packed, and only a well-armed guard kept space enough for the trial or examination to be conducted. In addition, a guard kept ward over

the apartment at the rear of the saloon, commonly used as a sleeping-place by the proprietors.

It is hardly necessary, even did space permit, to record minutely the opening of the examination, the evidence given by Horatio Adair, Albert Matney, and the men who had followed his lead in the attack on the mountain pocket and the rescue of the prisoner. All this, with the story of the narrow escape of the train from being wrecked, would be an old story to the reader, and consume space which can be utilized far better.

Enough that Rebel George, erect and defiant, a smile curling his heavily-mustached lip, listened to the plain evidence which seemed to convict him of being the notorious road-agent and outlaw, Elephant Tom, without flinching from the ugly looks and ominous murmurings which grew plainer and more open as the witnesses told their story.

One after another, the captured outlaws were brought forward, and without hesitation declared that they recognized in the prisoner, their chief, Elephant Tom.

Dirigo Branscombe was called, and briefly detailed his experience with Elephant Tom on the night last passed. He said he could swear to the prisoner, who had not only showed himself and partner his face, but acknowledged that he was Rebel George Bretto.

Elias Aiken fully corroborated the evidence last given.

Matters were beginning to look terribly black for Rebel George, and it was noticed by the spectators, that his careless smile faded away, to give place to a look of uneasiness.

"Is Wesley Hardcastle in the room?" asked the judge.

"Bet yer ole boots I jest am, jedge!" came a prompt response, and the tall miner was seen pushing his way through the crowd toward the witness-stand. "Hyar you be, jedge, an' ef ary two-legged critter kin blow a hole clean through this foggy a'fa'r, the ole man is your windmill!"

"What do you know of this affair?"

"Let me kiss the book, jedge. Trot out a deck o' keards, ef they ain't nothin' handier. It's the truth I want to sling at ye, an' I'm goin' to do it straight, too, betcher sweet life I jest be, honeys!"

The oath was administered, and the judge added:

"Give your evidence, Mr. Hardcastle. Make it as brief as you can, consistently with clearness."

"Leave it to the comp'ny ef anybody ever knowed me to spit out a onneressary word," declared Hardcastle, with an injured air. "I kin lick a man heap quicker'n I kin tell him I'm goin' to do it—"

"Your evidence, please," sharply interposed the judge.

"Jest you keep your shirt on, jedge, an' don't putt on so durned many frills, or mebbe I'll make you a call when court's out, which you won't think is so chuck full o' fun; which a kick in the ribs is as good as a wink to a blind burro, I reckon!"

"If you know anything concerning this case state it in plain terms or else leave the witness-stand."

"If I know anythin'—if I know— Why, you stiff-starched chunk o' putty, I know the bull durned a'fa'r, from a to izzard!" indignantly retorted the miner.

Albert Matney tapped him on the shoulder and whispered a few words into his ear which produced a marvelously calming effect, and Hardcastle at once plunged into his story.

"Las' night a fri'nd come to me an' said he wanted I should take a little scout 'long o' him. I went. It was over nigh to the shanty whar Foxy Branscombe hangs out with his pards, an' we hedn't much more 'n got thar when we see a two-legged critter go up an' slip inside the office."

"My pard giv' me the wink an' led the way 'round to the side winder, whar the curtain was pushed aside so we could see through. That wasn't all my pard wanted, so he out with a sorter 'rangement which he cut a hole through the glass, an' fixed things so we could hear as well as see. An' sech a-seein' an a-hearin' as them was would physic a cat—it jest would!"

"Thar was Foxy an' Fatty squatted at a table. Thar was the two-legged critter settin' in a cheer, holdin' the two of 'em kivered with a kipple o' sixes. An' that critter was rigged out most scan'alous. Uglier then a mud fence, staked an' double-ridered with tadpoles—durned ef he wasn't! Broader 'n he was long, almost, with flippers an' trotters more like a elephant's then them of a human man. An' nose—go 'way, b'lowny sassage! Jedge, it was bigger then a section o' hose fer sluicin', longer then the moral law, an' looked wuss then a ole maid with twins!"

"The durned thing wasn't nat'ral, though, fer in a bit we see the p'izen critter take off a mask, an' we hearn him say his name was Rebel George Bretto. We ketched a glimp' o' his own mug jest then, an' it looked powerful like the one that is starin' at me so mighty oneasy, jest now!" and the witness pointed

his remark by extending a finger toward the prisoner.

"It is all a lie!" cried Rebel George. "All a foul plot to get me out of the way—and you're at the bottom of it!" he added, fiercely, turning to where Branscombe was tightly wedged in by the crowd.

Until then, both Branscombe and Aiken had showed considerable uneasiness as Hardcastle gave in his evidence, but now their faces expressed satisfaction.

"You shall have an ample opportunity to prove the evidence false, prisoner," said the judge, coldly. "Until that time, however, you must curb your tongue. I speak for your own good, as a little reflection will doubtless show you."

Rebel George closed his lips tightly, and though his jaws were firmly set, his bronzed cheeks pale, his dark eyes glowing like living coals, he maintained silence.

"It was better'n a show, jest to see how the critter played it down so fine onto them two boys," grinned Hardcastle, clearly enjoying the sensation his evidence was creating. "They jest knuckled down like twin lambs, an' shelled out the lucre when he squinted at 'em wicked over his sixes. Then they lay cown on the floor, an' he tied 'em up an' puckacheed."

"Jest then my mate give me another hint, an' we struck out after the critter. Not fur, though. Mate he jest made one be'old jump, an' fetched the feller a crack on the cazeza that laid him out colder'n a wedge. I piled onto him, too, an' we trussed him up mighty snug, an' toted him over to my shebang."

Wesley Hardcastle had indeed produced a sensation, by this totally unexpected turn which his evidence had taken.

The crowd stared at each other, open-mouthed. The judge leaned far forward, his eyes wide open.

Rebel George uttered a sharp cry, and the blood flowed back into his face again.

Foxy Branscombe stood like one petrified, for a moment, then a bowling curse parted his lips as he raised his left arm and shook his clinched fist toward the grinning witness.

"It's a lie! false as hell itself!" he snarled, savagely.

A heavy hand descended upon his shoulder, and as he turned his head, it was to meet the hated visage of Tompoleon Tarbox, the man from Purgatoire.

A ghastly pallor swept over his bandaged face, but his nerve did not fail him, even in that extremity, and he snarled:

"Hands off, you scoundrell! What do you mean?"

"That you are my prisoner," was the stern response, as that iron grip tightened. "I arrest you, Dirigo Branscombe, for murder, among a score of other charges."

A mad endeavor to escape—a brief struggle—then the speculator stood powerless, his hands in irons.

Elias Aiken tried to steal away, but before he could take a second step, two stout men grasped him, and almost before he could realize the fact that he too was entrapped, his arms were drawn behind him and his wrists encircled by handcuffs.

The crowd which filled the room, surged to and fro, intensely excited, some cheering the turn things were taking, others giving vent to their disapprobation with a rapidly growing distinctness that savored of danger for bold Tompoleon and his allies.

"Rescue, boys!" shouted Foxy Branscombe, seeing his chance, and promptly grasping it. "It's all an infernal scheme to save Elephant Tom by disgracing us. Down with them!"

"Do your duty, men, if they crowd you!" sternly cried the disguised detective, holding Foxy Branscombe powerless with one sinewy hand, while he drew a revolver with the other.

Then it became clear that the officers of law had made their arrangements carefully, with an eye to something of this sort, when their trap was sprung. A double row of stern-faced men surrounded the spot where the two partners stood in irons and each man drew a revolver, holding it cocked, with the muzzle turned backward and resting against their shoulder, ready to be brought down and forward at a word.

Not a cry, not a threat: only grim silence and still more grim determination. And it was this prompt readiness for hot work that turned the threatening tide.

"Gentlemen," cried the man from Purgatoire, "when the proper time comes, you shall one and all of you be fully satisfied that these two men are justly taken into custody. But until then, the man or men who dares to interfere with us, in the discharge of our sworn duty, as officers of justice, does so at his or their own peril."

A brief period of silence, broken by the judge, who had stared in amazement at the wild confusion which so suddenly broke out in his court: a sentiment which was quickly changed to indignation and a sense of injured honor.

"This is a shame and a disgrace, sir—"

"Which you will comprehend more fully, my dear sir," coolly interposed the detective,

"when you have listened to a little more evidence bearing upon this curious case. May I ask you to suffer me to say a few words, as a witness?"

"For or against the prisoner?"

"As this is merely a preliminary examination, I don't suppose it makes any particular difference. I wish to get at the bottom facts, and all I say will be the truth, spoken without fear or favor, whether it weighs against the accused or not. Will you accept my evidence, sir?"

Justice Brennan nodded stiffly, looking very much like a dignified personage who had received a snub, without knowing exactly how to resent it.

The witness spoke briefly, but clearly. He substantiated the evidence given by Hardcastle. He was the man who enlisted the worthy miner on the past night, revealing to him his real purpose in Durango. He it was who led the way in their espial on to the two members of the Triad, and beneath his hand fell the notorious Elephant Tom.

"In conclusion, your honor, I need only say this: from that hour—a little past two o'clock, this morning—until the present moment, Elephant Tom has been kept under close watch and ward by myself and my men. If you please, I can place him on the witness stand directly."

"He lies!" snarled Foxy Branscombe, fairly frothing at the mouth. "It's all a vile plot to free that demon yonder!"

With a bow, the detective stepped from the witness stand, and then his heavy hand fell upon the shoulder of the infuriated villain. At a signal, his men, moving in concert, pressed back the crowd until an open, semi-circular space was left around the rear of the stand. Another signal, and the guard at the rear door opened it and two men emerged, holding between them the ironed form of a third.

A brief, breathless silence, then a wild uproar as the often described, stumpy form and hideous mask of Elephant Tom was recognized by the crowd. One roaring roll, then silence again, all eagerly waiting for the end of this strangely mixed up affair.

Straight to the witness stand, the two men conducted the masked prisoner, a way being opened for them by the guard who had held the inner door.

"Your honor," his voice sounding hollow and sepulchral from the depths of his mask, "I wish it distinctly understood that I am about to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I have been promised nothing by the gentlemen who brought me here. If I thought there was the slightest chance of escaping the consequences of my folly, I would not hesitate to lie out of it, if possible. As it is, I'll not let the innocent suffer for the deeds of the guilty."

He turned his head, and as though that was a signal, one of his guards quickly removed his irons, and the fellow slipped off his mask, stepped out of the thickly padded suit of rubber and buckskin, then slowly turned himself about so that all in court could see him.

A mutter of wonder greeted the act. In face, in figure, in every essential respect, he was the very counterpart of Rebel George Bretto!

A short laugh escaped his lips, as he took a small sponge and a bottle of liquid from his breast. Wetting the sponge, he passed it over his hands and face. The drooping mustache came off, the dark complexion disappeared, and with them vanished the startling resemblance.

A cry of recognition from the crowd as a well-known character of the town stood revealed by his own act; a drunken, worthless rascal, who had once been a noted actor on the Eastern boards, but who, for years past, had spent his more sober moments amusing bar-room audiences with his skill in assuming any and all characters, living or dead, real or imaginary, asking no reward further than an occasional drink of the vile poison to which he had become a wretched slave.

"Tracy Fitzmaurice, your honor, no longer Rebel George, George Brent, nor Elephant Tom," he said, turning toward the astonished judge, with a low bow. "I assumed those roles, only for the one performance, induced to thus degrade my talents by the offer of gold galore. If you ask who is the original Jacobs, I cheerfully reply—"

Until now Foxy Branscombe had stood like one petrified, his lower jaw fallen, as he stared at the swift metamorphosis; but now a wild, snarling cry escaped his lips, and with a swift motion he snatched the long-bladed knife from its sheath at the hip of Tompoleon Tarbox, and gripping it tight in his uninjured hand, raising with it the bandaged member by the short links of the handcuffs, and leaped toward the speaker.

His foot caught against something—no one ever knew or explained the exact cause of the catastrophe—and he fell headlong to the floor. A wild screech—and he rolled over on his back, the blade buried to its hilt in his breast.

Instantly the detective was beside him, to be repulsed.

"Bloodhound!" gasped the wretch, "I cheat both you and the gallows, after all!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A GENERAL CLEARING UP.

AMID the wildest confusion, an opening was made through the surging crowd to admit the surgeon who had attended Dirigo Branscombe after his encounter with Tompoleon Tarbox, and kneeling beside the wounded man he made an examination of his hurt in breathless silence.

Foxy Branscombe watched him keenly, and was the first to read his doom, as written in that red face. A momentary spasm contorted his own features, but as quickly vanished, and in its place came a reckless defiance.

"Bah! what matters? I've played for a big stake, and lost; but no man can say that I didn't make my cards bring all they were worth. Get me out of this crowd and I'll make a clean breast of the whole affair."

With the last words he swooned, and it looked like a dead man the detective and his assistants were carrying out of the room.

As soon as order could be partially restored, the judge bade Tracy Fitzmaurice resume his evidence.

It was delivered volubly, and with many flowers of speech which would look most admirable if printed in full, which we would surely do but for an unfortunate lack of space.

As stated, he had been hired to play a double role, for that one occasion only, and the man who hired him was none other than Foxy Branscombe.

A portion of the band of road agents watched their chance and took Rebel George captive while out fishing, and stowed him away under guard. The rest went to check the train, the false Rebel George playing his part to perfection.

His main duty was to obtain possession of Horatio Adair, to accomplish which he had to trust to his own wit and circumstances, when once the train was stopped. How he succeeded the reader is already aware. When the agreement was made to walk to Florida, and there take the old coach, the pretended Rebel George passed the word to one of his men who hung near him, and the road-agents, by making use of a short cut through the hills, were in ample time to lay their ambush.

What followed the reader already knows, and there is no necessity for repetition here.

Foxy Branscombe saw to having the cash stowed away in the safe. And it was understood between him and his tool that Elephant Tom, *pro. tem.*, was to levy that heavy tax on him and Elias Aiken, the whole amount to be eventually turned over to the crafty schemer who had taken this bold method of fleecing his partners.

Rebel George also made an explanation of the part he had, both willingly and unwillingly, played in the strange drama.

He heard enough, from the conversation passing between the two guards, to feel that only bold action could save him from the toils which were tightening around him, and when at last the chance came, he jumped at it eagerly enough. He overcame his careless watchers, and acting on the hints gathered from them, he made his way to the mountain pocket, where he was discovered by one of the horse-guards as he scouted around, and killed him to save himself. The brief struggle aroused the other sleeper, and he also was silenced.

Stealing among the rocks, Rebel George at length gained a position from whence he witnessed the torture of a—to him at the moment—unknown man, and watching his chance, he risked his life to set him at liberty, believing that he could readily swear that he, Rebel George, was not engaged in the vile plot.

Instead, he was accused of being the notorious outlaw, and as such taken to Durango, bound hand and foot.

Scarcely had Rebel George concluded his account, than Tompoleon Tarbox—or Darius Epperson, as he now announced himself—returned to the room, and gravely stated that he held the death-bed confession of Elephant Tom, or Dirigo Branscombe.

Only that portion of the confession bearing immediately on the case of Rebel George was read by the detective: but it was more than sufficient.

Dirigo Branscombe, believing himself dying, swore that he was telling the truth, calling Heaven to bear him witness.

He was Elephant Tom. He had invented the stuffed suit with the hideous mask, and until the night last past, he alone had ever worn them. His first intention had been one of plunder, merely, and this accounted for the repeatedly successful blows which the notorious road-agent had aimed at the wealth of the Triad.

Then he discovered that Rebel George Bretto was none other than the man whom he and his partners had so ruthlessly robbed and injured in the days gone by, and believing that he was only biding his time to make a sure stroke for vengeance, he racked his brain until he concocted the deep and cunning plot which forms the ground-work of this story.

When he had secured the ransom-money, he meant to gather an armed force, and following the pretended Elephant Tom, come upon the men who guarded Rebel George, upon whose

person the disguise worn by Elephant Tom was to have been placed, and thus the odium be fastened upon his shoulders. There should be no trial. His glib tongue could readily set the lynching fever on fire, when a rope would forever remove all traces of his cunning work.

Now, in dying, he was only sorry that he had failed. For naught else did he feel the slightest trace of regret. As a final token of hatred, he left his eternal curse on all those whom he had injured through his evil life.

Ten minutes later Rebel George walked out of the court-room, free as air, cheered to the echo by the fickle crowd.

A pleasant little gathering filled the lone cabin of Rebel George Bretto that evening, and many were the mutual explanations made and called for.

Dirigo Branscombe and Elias Aiken were "wanted" for the murder of a miner who had struck it rich, some five years before, but whose death had remained a mystery for many days. At length Darius Epperson solved the enigma, and was about to arrest the criminals, when, in the course of his investigations he believed he had stumbled upon a clew to the identity of Elephant Tom, on whose head were placed half a dozen rewards.

At first he believed that Dirigo Branscombe and Rebel George were in partnership, so far as the robbing was concerned, and when he piped the sport for a day or two, he recognized in him a man with whom he had sworn eternal friendship during the war, though Bretto was one of Morgan's rough-riders, while he, Epperson, fought on the other side.

For this old friendship, he bade Naomi warn her parent to save himself by flight while he could.

Rebel George also made full confession. Naomi was not his child, but the daughter of his younger brother, a man whom Epperson loved as his own kindred. It was a melancholly story, of betrayed love, false friend, faithless wife; an elopement, a long and persistent search by a crazed husband and father; a meeting in that far-away city by the sea, and a terrible tragedy.

The father sought out his brother, told his story, placed the child in his arms, then died.

But a few words more and our story is ended.

Horatio Adair never entirely recovered from that terrible ordeal, but gradually grew weaker, and never lived to return to his home in Denver. Before he died, he called Rebel George to his bedside, and humbly confessed the great wrong he had put upon him, aided by his partners in the Triad. He made what reparation he could, and before death closed his eyes, was made almost happy by receiving the full forgiveness of the injured one.

Albert Matney made known to him the part he had played so successfully, and was forgiven for the sterling qualities he had displayed, and placing Maura's hand in his, Horatio Adair passed away, even as he prayed heaven to bless their union.

Darius Epperson, a handsome man of middle age, when his quaint disguise was cast off, wooed and won charming Naomi Bretto.

Triphammer never attempted to earn the blood-money slipped into his pocket by Aiken, but stole away from Durango in the night, and has not returned, to this day.

Elias Aiken suffered death for murder.

Tracy Fitzmaurice was taken charge of by a select little party, who wrote considerable more than the ten commandments on his back, then warned him to flee the country.

He left.

THE END.

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